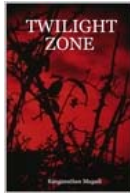


TWILIGHT ZONE

SHORT STORIES



2005

RANGANATHAN MAGADI

TWILIGHT ZONE

Short Stories

WRITTEN

BY

RANGANATHAN MAGADI

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Author's note

I have conceptualized nine short stories and abridged them into a book under the title, 'Twilight Zone'. The stories relate to murder, love, hatred, sex, AIDS, filial affection, terrorism, patriotism, marital fraud, medical negligence and of human bondage.

I dedicate this book to Prof. Sreenath, Shobha Sreenath, Ravindranath N, Jamuna R Mysore, Apu Kaushik and Abhi Kaushik for the unstinting and whole-hearted support rendered by them in the publication of this novel.

Ranganathan Magadi

Other books by this author:

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STORY ONE*Frigid Zone*

Caroline and Neil were strolling along the riverside on a spring morning when they encountered their unfriendly neighbors, Robert and Jessica, who always refused to recognize them. Neil pretended that he did not notice them, while Caroline gave a wry smile. When they had crossed the road, Neil remarked,

“She is an impudent, saucy fool. I don’t like her at all,”

“They seem to avoid us. It is really distressing to have such unfriendly neighbors. Isn’t it Neil?” asked Caroline uncannily.

“Someone told me that she has deserted her husband to live with this man who is as old as her father.” Neil said with contempt.

“She must be really crazy to leave her young husband and live with this man.” Caroline inferred.

“Her divorce case is still pending in court. She hasn’t married this man yet.” Neil told her.

“Love is blind. She must be seeing something extra-ordinary in this man,” replied Caroline symbolically.

“The society has undergone a sea change in outlook and values. It was something inconceivable that a woman could live with a man who was not her husband, some fifty years ago,” Neil said. “These days more and more women are deserting their husbands. That is why there have been so many divorce cases.”

“You are talking as if men have always been angels. It is these men who entice women and then jilt them.” Caroline accused.

“Anyway, why should we dispute over a matter that does not bother us? We are here to enjoy the cool breeze of the spring morning.” Neil reminded.

Neil was nearly seventy, and Caroline was around sixty-five. They had purchased a small house a few months ago and had moved to Cleveland to live a retired life. One morning, Caroline and Neil were sitting on the lawn enjoying the beautiful sunshine. Robert and Jessica came out of their home hand in hand, laughing gleefully. Robert pulled out his car from the garage, kissed Jessica and drove away.

“Robert seems to take good care of his girlfriend. They seem to be so close and a good match too, not to mention their age difference.”

“Mountain’s surface appear smooth from a distance.”

“Do you mean to say there is crack in their relationship?”

“I don’t know. I guess they have some problem or there is going to one soon.”

“Are you prophesying or what?”

“Not exactly, but some trouble is brewing for sure.”

“How do you know?” she demanded to know.

A Corolla pulled up in the driveway of Robert’s home. A lanky man aged about twenty-five, with red hair and white pale face, alighted from the car and went into the house, as Neil watched.

“Look, I saw Robert leaving the house half an hour ago but now, a stranger enters his house with a latch key. Do you know who it is?” asked Neil.

“How do I know who it is? She never introduced him to me. I have seen him once or twice entering her house.” Caroline said

“I sense something fishy in there,” said Neil.

“You suspect everyone who enters that house. I don’t know when you will start suspecting me. If you do, I have no choice but to divorce you. Don’t say that I didn’t warn you.”

“My sixth sense says that there is something fishy. Neil can never be wrong.”

They sat there and watched what goes on in that house. For nearly half an hour, everything appeared normal but suddenly they heard Jessica and the stranger arguing over some matter. They spoke louder and louder as the argument heated up.

“I think they are arguing over a matter.” Neil said

“Yes,” agreed Caroline.

“Now they are laughing,” observed Neil.

“They are really very weird,” remarked Caroline

“Now there is perfect silence,” wondered Neil.

“You are right.”

Fifteen minutes later, the stranger emerged out of the building. Jessica followed him to the porch and said in a loud voice, ‘Peter, take care, Bye, bye.’ Peter sat behind the wheel and drove away. Neil and Caroline exchanged glances but said nothing.

A few days later, one evening Neil and Caroline sat on their lawn, enjoying the amber rays falling on their radiant faces, when the same Corolla pulled up and Peter went into the house. The Sun went down the horizon an hour later and the night came on but Peter was still there.

“Look, Robert is entering the driveway.” Caroline told Neil in a hushed voice. Both of them watched the reaction of Robert.

Robert was looking disturbed because there was a car in the driveway. He stopped his car behind Corolla that was already there, and came out of his car. He took a quick look at it and slowly walked into the house.

“It is an interesting situation. We will wait and watch,” observed Neil as Caroline looked towards Robert’s house expecting some trouble. They heard the voice of Robert. He was shouting at the top of his voice. Peter hurriedly came out and drove away.

“He looked frightened,” observed Caroline.

“Did you note down the description of his car?”

“Yes, it has a registration starting with the letter J. It is gray Corolla for sure. But why do we need it?”

“If at all there is some problem, we may need it at a future date.”

“You want to be a detective, eh?”

“I hear him shouting again, Shall we intervene?”

“No, certainly not, just watch.” Caroline advised.

They sat in the dark for more than an hour. Suddenly they heard shrill muffled sob and then everything became silent. Neil and Caroline slowly moved to Robert’s place and peeked through the window. The lights were on. Jessica was trying to leave the house with her baggage and Robert was obstructing her passage. Neil and Caroline quietly returned to their premises. Ten minutes later, there was total silence in the house and the lights were turned off. Only the kitchen light and the light on the first

floor bedroom were burning. Neil and Caroline went into the house, closing the door behind.

One day, Peter came to Robert's place early in the morning when Neil and Caroline were returning home from the morning walk. Robert came out of his house and shook hands with him and invited him to the house. They went in closing the door behind.

"This is strange." Caroline exclaimed.

"What is strange?"

"Those two adversaries should shake hands."

"I don't understand. Be explicit."

"We thought that Robert and Peter were adversaries. They were shaking hands today. Robert was calling him, Peter in a friendly tone. Isn't it unusual?"

Stop worrying about Robert and Jessica. I am hungry. I need to eat my breakfast." They went in.

Several months passed by. Jessica was looking sickly and she rarely came out of the house. Neil and Caroline had not seen Corolla in Robert's premises for quite sometime. Robert rarely came home; and when he did come, he came late at night and left early in the morning, and Neil had no chance of peeking out. One day Neil and Caroline went out for a morning walk at six.

"I don't see Jessica these days. She has stopped coming out." Caroline told Neil casually.

"That night she was ready to quit the place with her baggage. Do you remember? She might have left the place." Neil suggested.

"But I saw Peter once or twice after that incident. He did not come to see Robert for sure." Caroline pointed out.

"I told you, you know, that something was cooking." He looked at her in anticipation of appreciation of his intellectual ability.

"While cooking, they may have spilt some beans, I am afraid." Caroline alluded.

When they reached home, Caroline collected newspaper from the mail box and said to Neil,

“Neil, be glancing at this newspaper. I will talk to Jessica and come back. Okay?”

“Wish you good luck,” taunted Neil.

Caroline went to meet Jessica and knocked at her door. Robert came out and asked curtly,

“What do you want?” He was frightened at the sight of Caroline.

“I haven’t seen Jessica for a long time. I came to enquire about her health. May I see her?”

“She is not home.”

“When can I see her?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say. She is out of town.”

“I am sorry to bother you. Take care, Bye.”

He gave a hostile look and said,

“Stop prying over your neighbors. It is in your own interest.”

She told Neil that Robert gave a hostile look and warned her not to poke her nose into his affairs; and she surmised that Jessica had left home and doubted if she would ever come back.

Half an hour later, Robert parked his car in the driveway and hurriedly loaded some baggage into his trunk

“It appears Robert is leaving town for a few days,” said Neil.

Robert left the place and within fifteen minutes Caroline saw Corolla parked in Robert’s driveway. Peter walked up the driveway and entered the house inserting a latch key.

“I go mad whenever I try to figure out what goes on in that house.” Caroline said as they both went in.

Caroline was in kitchen preparing tea around three in the afternoon when she saw a stranger entering the house inserting a latchkey to Robert’s door. It was the first time she had seen him around. He had worn a shabby dress and was looking unusually circumspect that roused her suspicion. She waited for his return watchfully while she prepared some food for dinner. She was about to leave kitchen when she saw the stranger running out of the house towards the wood from the postern door. Caroline raised

alarm. Neil ran out of the house, gave a hot chase, caught him by his collar and dragged him towards Robert's house.

"Please let me go. Don't hand me over to the police," he begged.

"Who are you? Why did you enter that house?"

"I went in search of food. I had not eaten for the last three days. I was hungry."

"What did you steal from that house?"

"I didn't steal anything."

"Stay here until the Police arrive. We will call the Police."

"I told you I am not a thief. Please let me go."

"Then, what were you doing there?"

"I was released from prison last week. I had no employment. I went in search of some bread."

"Why did you start running out of the house suddenly?"

"I found a body in the house."

"Do you mean to say that you have found someone dead in the house?"

"Yes"

"Whose body was that?"

"I don't know. It is a female."

By then the police arrived and Neil let him free. They recognized the man and the Officer asked him grudgingly.

"What is the matter, Paul? What are you doing here?"

"I didn't steal anything. I entered the house to eat some food as I have been starving for the last three days."

"He says there is a body in the house." Neil told the police.

"What did you see there?"

"A body"

"Is it a male or a female?"

"A female"

“Did you kill her?”

“No, I did not. She was already dead.”

“Stay where you are. Don’t make any attempt to run away. If you do, you are in for trouble.” The Officer said to Paul. He turned to his men and ordered them to search the house. They went in and searched the house. They did not find the ‘body’.

“Sir, we did not find ‘body’ in there.”

The Officer went in and thoroughly searched the house but he could not find the body.

“We did not find the body, Paul. You are in for deep trouble now.”

“If you don’t find the body now, you are in for trouble, Officer.” The thief dared to taunt him.

“Come in and see for yourself, Paul.”

“I have seen the body. It is your task to find where the body is, and whose body it is.”

The cops ransacked the entire house but they did not see the body.

“I am sorry, Paul, I have to arrest you on the charge of trespassing and ransacking the house illegally.”

“I can prove that there was a body in the house.”

“In that case, I will register a case of murder and you will be the first suspect.”

“Officer, I can help you find the body if you let me in.” Paul told the officer exasperated by his confrontation. The Police let Paul in; and he took the police straight to the refrigerator.

“Open the refrigerator, please.” He spoke confidently.

“Paul, we are not searching for food. We are searching for a body.”

“I say, open the fridge.” He repeated.

“Paul, you know the consequence of fooling the Police. Don’t you?”

“I say, open this fridge.” Paul repeated more emphatically brimming with confidence.

A cop opened its door and a body fell out of the refrigerator on him. He screamed hysterically and stepped back as everybody stood there confounded.

“Paul, how did it happen? Explain.”

“I don’t know anything. I am innocent.”

“You are the first suspect. Tell us what happened.”

“When I entered the house using a master key, I didn’t find anyone in the house. I was thirsty and my tongue was dry. I saw a refrigerator in the kitchen and I opened it to see if there was anything to eat and drink. A heavy body suddenly fell on me that sent shock waves through my spines. I pushed back the body in panic, closed the fridge and started running. Next door neighbor caught me by my collar and called the police.” Paul explained.

“Whose body was that?”

“I don’t know. It is your task to find out?”

The police held an inquest. The first witness was Neil.

“What is your name?”

“I am Neil. I live next door.”

“Who lives here, in this house?”

“One, by name Robert, and his spouse, Jessica, live here.”

“When did you last see them?”

“I saw Robert this morning.”

“When did you last see Jessica?”

“I have not seen her for several months.”

“Did any visitor frequent the house?”

“I noticed only one visitor who frequented the house.”

“Can you recollect his face and come out with some description?”

“I don’t remember his face. Sorry, I can’t give any description of that person. My eyesight is less than normal. They called the visitor, Peter.”

“Thank you, Neil. I will call you again.”

The police officer called Caroline to give statement

“Did you see any visitor to this house at any time?” He asked her.

“I have seen a visitor who frequented this house. Jessica called him Peter. He was here this morning.

“Can you describe him?”

“Of course I can. He has a long face, red hair and pale white complexion. He is a tall and lanky man.”

“Can you identify him if we show him along with other suspects?”

“Of course I can. I remember his face clearly.”

“Now can you describe the man, Robert, who was your neighbor?”

“Certainly, He has a medium build, hefty body, bright red face and blood-shot eyes. He is in his late fifties”

“Now, can you describe the dead woman?”

“Jessica was her name. She was very pale and sickly. She was in her late twenties, I guess.

“Come in and identify the body, please.”

Caroline went in closing her nose tight to avoid the nauseating smell of the decaying corpse and identified the body as that of Jessica. After the inquest, the police removed the body for post-mortem.

When the police were gone, Neil and Caroline sighed in relief.

“I always suspected that man, the visitor to their house.” Caroline said

“Why did you suspect him?”

“I think Peter used to come home in the absence of Robert to court Jessica. When she did not yield, he tried to rape her, which she resisted, and threw objects at him and he also threw at her a certain object in rage that hit her, killing her instantaneously.”

“You imagine things too well. In my opinion, Robert came home one night and saw Jessica in bed with the stranger. The stranger tried to

run away, but Robert threw a heavy object that missed the stranger and whereupon, the stranger madly picked up a heavy object and threw at Robert. Jessica came in between and the object hit her in the temple and she died. Robert lifted her in his arms and placed her on her bed, but the stranger made good his escape. Robert became panicky and put the body in the refrigerator and ran away from home.”

“Who is that Stranger?”

“Obviously, Peter”

“Both are possible. We agree that Peter was the killer. There was an affair between him and Jessica. The murder was an accident and they were hurling objects at each other at the time of accident.”

“But your version is that there were only two persons, Jessica and Peter. Peter made an attempt to rape.”

“That is right.”

“But I say that there were three persons. It was not an attempt to rape.”

“Stop, it is your conjecture, not the truth. Come on in, we are getting late for dinner.” Caroline called him in and they went in closing the door behind them.

Officer McCarthy was perusing the autopsy report with his assistant, Bryan

“The autopsy report says that there was a mark of injury on her right temple. The wound was deep enough to kill her.”

“I guessed it, sir. We have found a number of objects scattered all over the place. That means they were used as missiles by two or more people in their fight.”

“So you mean that there was an altercation before her death.”

“Certainly, it is quite evident. In the course of throwing objects, a certain sharp heavy object hit Jessica and she died.” Bryan was sure of what he was asserting.

“The question is who those people present at the time of altercation were? Who threw that heavy object at Jessica? Why did they kill Jessica?”

Was it an accident or a homicide under grave and sudden provocation or was it a cold-blooded murder?" said Mc raising his head looking quizzically at Bryan."

"It is our job now to find out."

"There is another angle to this case now."

"What is it?"

"The report also says she had AIDS at the time of her death."

"Could she have died of AIDS?" exclaimed Bryan.

"If she had AIDS, she could have contracted it either through Robert or through that visitor," surmised Mc.

"Does it matter anyway to our case?" asked Bryan

"I don't know. But I would like to test their blood when we get them. That could be material to the case." Replied Mc

"We have to find out immediately," he said thoughtfully. "Who caused the injury and why?" Bryan suggested.

"Obviously we have two suspects, Robert and Peter."

Mc declared.

"Our immediate job is to find out who Robert is and where he was at the time of her death." Bryan said to Mc

"We have to examine Peter too. But I would start this case with the questioning of our important witnesses, Neil and Caroline. Before we interrogate anybody I would like to search the house thoroughly once again." Mc said

The police searched the entire premises in the next two hours. They could not find any clue to incriminate anybody.

"Post a detective before his house to keep watch on persons who enter that house. Robert will certainly visit that place in a few days. He will go back to pick up some materials or documents or to destroy some evidence."

"I will do it now." Bryan got up from his seat but he did not move out.

"What is the matter Bryan?"

“Mc, there is an important finding. All letters in the mailbox are addressed to Robert but there is one, in the name of Dr. Ron.” Bryan pointed out.

“Good. It is an important piece of information. Robert could have lived here under a false name. His real name may be Ron. We will confirm it,” he said. “Find out from the telephone directory who this Ron is and where does he work.”

“Mc, you mean to say that Robert and Ron are one and the same?”

“We can’t rule out the possibility. They could also be two different persons. Find out who this Dr. Ron is.”

Bryan came back to Mc in half an hour triumphantly.

“Have you found out any clue?”

“We have found out that Ron is a doctor by profession.”

“Where does he work?”

“He works for a local hospital.”

“Come on, we shall go now to the hospital.”

McCarthy and Bryan went to the hospital where he was working and enquired about Dr. Ron.

“We have come to see Dr. Robert.” He mentioned Robert deliberately.

“There is no one of that name who works here.”

“We mean the Physician who runs this facility.”

“This is Ron’s facility. He is out of town. He will be here tomorrow.”

Next day the police went to meet Dr. Ron. One of the hospital staff led them to Ron who was busy attending to his patients. He finished attending to a patient and came out to meet the police.

“What can I do for you?” There was no anxiety on his face or he had hid his anxiety dexterously.

“We need to talk to you.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

“What is your name?”

“Ron.”

“Where do you stay?”

“At Monroe hills, what is the matter?”

“Who lives at Lincoln drive?”

“I don’t know. I have never lived in Lincoln drive.”

“Do you know one Robert who lives in Lincoln drive?”

“I don’t know anyone of that name.”

“Okay, we believe you. What is the name of your wife?”

“Jessica.”

“Where is she now?”

“She is in my house, at Bedford”

“Come on, we shall see her urgently.”

“What is this, officer? Why do you want to see her? Is there anything wrong?”

“We will answer your questions when we get there.” Mc replied briefly.

They were at Dr. Ron’s house in about half an hour. When they rang the doorbell a middle-aged woman opened the door and looked at them in great astonishment.

“Ron, what went wrong? Why are the police here?” She asked innocently.

“They are investigating a case. I don’t know exactly what they want from us. Come in Officer. Meet my wife, Jessica.”

“Bryan, we are wasting our time on a false lead. Come on, we shall go now.” He turned to Ron and Jessica and said,

“Thank you, Ron. Thank you, Jessica. We will come back to you sometime later. Bryan, come on, get going.”

They drove away. While returning to the police station, Bryan asked,

“McCarthy, we are back to square one. Where did we go wrong?”

He narrowed his eyes and thought for a while.

“Bryan, collect more information on Ron’s antecedents. Okay?”

“Okay Mc, is it getting complicated?”

“It is not difficult to solve this case. The criminal will visit Robert’s home tonight. We are sure to catch him there.”

“What do you think of Ron and his wife, Jessica?”

“Some ingenious couple has used the names of Ron and Jessica to live in Lincoln drive.”

“Do you think that Robert and Ron know each other?”

“I guess so.”

That night Bryan and McCarthy entered the premises without being noticed by the neighbors, accompanied by two cops. They all sat in darkness, in kitchen, surrounding the refrigerator. They waited till ten but nobody came.

“What shall we do now, Mc?”

“We have to wait here the whole night, if need be.”

“Okay, said Bryan and they all waited. The clock was chiming twelve. Still there was no trace of the criminal.

“Mc, we are wasting our time. No one comes here. The criminal knows that we are hunting for him and he will come nowhere near the snare.”

“He will certainly come to destroy evidence. We have not yet announced that we have found a body. The criminal has placed the body in the fridge and he knows he has got to dispose off the body to destroy evidence. If Ron has murdered his girl friend, he will certainly come back tonight to dispose off the body. He knows the police suspect him.”

“What if both Ron and Robert are not one and the same as you imagine?”

“That’s what we are planning to find out tonight. If they are two different persons, the real criminal appears tonight to destroy the evidence.”

At two in the morning the rain started pounding and the temperature went down. They were feeling uncomfortable, not knowing how long they have to wait. A car approached the house slowly, and a moment later the headlights were turned off. They heard the footsteps of heavy shoes

approaching the postern door. They hid themselves in different corners, as a man opened the latch by inserting a key and clicked the door open. He slowly walked in without turning on the light from the postern door and walked straight to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He stood there for a minute and suddenly sensing that someone was watching his movements, he started to run. The police turned on the light and caught the intruder.

“Mc, it is the same Ron, Dr. Ron.” Bryan said astounded.

They handcuffed him and brought him to the police station; and one of the cops brought Neil and Caroline for identification.

“Caroline, look into his face and tell us, if this is your neighbor, Robert.”

She looked into his face and identified that it was indeed her neighbor Robert. Then Neil also identified that it was Robert. Ron stood there mutely handcuffed. The police questioned Ron the whole morning from three to six at the police station.

“What is your real name, Ron or Robert?”

“My name is Ron. I am a doctor.”

“Sure, we know that you are a doctor and you live in Bedford with your wife and all that stuff. Tell us who Robert is”

“I am Ron. I don’t know any Robert.”

“Your neighbors have identified you as Robert.”

“I never introduced myself to them as Robert. Janet must have told the neighbors that I was Robert.”

“Who is Janet?”

“Janet is my girlfriend who lived there.”

“Why will she introduce you as Robert, Ron?”

“Perhaps she did not want people to know who I was. She might have deliberately misled them.”

“It is a good defense because she is no more alive to give evidence.”

“What do you mean, Officer? What happened to her?”

“She is dead.”

“I did not know about it, believe me, Officer.”

“She has been murdered. The body is in the morgue. We will take you there for identification shortly. We have some questions to ask you now.”

“I will answer your questions.” He sounded natural.

“What were you doing there at this wee hour of the morning?”

“I went there to meet my girlfriend, Janet.”

“How long did you know her?”

“She had been working in the Department of Pathology. I knew her for the last six years.”

“What was she there, a lab assistant?”

“No, she was a receptionist.”

“Why did you go there at the wee hour?”

“I always meet her at this hour. I didn’t want to be noticed by her neighbors. They think I live here because they see me here in the morning hours.”

“Why did you enter the house with a duplicate key?”

“I have a duplicate key and I always use it to enter the house.”

“Why did you walk to the refrigerator without turning on the light?”

He fumbled for words and said finally, “I was thirsty and I knew the fridge was there.”

“Oh, you were thirsty at two in the morning and so you went to the fridge to drink juice without turning on light. We don’t believe it, Sorry.”

“Believe me Officer, I was thirsty.”

“How can we believe you, Ron? You told us yesterday that you never lived in Lincoln dr.”

“Even now I affirm that I never lived here. I visited Janet often. The neighbors thought that I lived here. It was not my fault if they thought so.”

“Of course, but when and how did you come to know that her body was lying in the fridge?”

“I didn’t know that she was dead. Did you say that her body was lying in the fridge?”

“Yes, we found her body in the fridge.”

He was silent and a bit puzzled too.

“Why did you start running when you saw the fridge empty?”

“I did not run because the fridge was empty. I sensed that someone was watching me in the house. So I started running.”

“Who is the lady you introduced to us as Jessica this morning?”

“It was my wife.”

“You introduced your wife as Jessica. Here the neighbors call this dead woman Jessica. Which of them is ‘real’ Jessica?”

“My wife at Bedford is Jessica. This girl is Janet.”

“You lied to the neighbors that Janet is Jessica.”

“I did not lie to any one. Janet must have told them that her name was Jessica to hide her identity.

“Okay, who was the stranger that frequented your house?”

“Peter, his name is Peter. He is my friend. He stopped coming to the hospital a month ago.” There was glee in his eyes.

“Where does he work?”

“He works in the clinical laboratory.”

“Where do we find him?”

He gave an address.

“Ron, when did Jessica die?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did she die?”

“I don’t know. I did not cause her any injury.”

“How was your relationship with Jessica?”

“It was very cordial. It was quite normal.”

“Was she upset with you?”

“Not at all, she was quite happy with me.”

“Did you tell her at any time that you lived with another woman?”

“No, I did not tell her.”

“Did she know that you were living with another woman?”

“I don’t think so.”

“When did you leave Lincoln drive home?”

“Monday morning.”

“What time of the day was that?”

“It was morning, seven thirty.”

“Who was with her when you left her?”

“None, she was alone in the house.”

“When did you return from the tour?”

“I returned yesterday at eight in the morning.”

“Did you go to Lincoln drive or Bedford?”

“I went to Bedford home.”

“Do you suspect anyone?”

“No, I don’t suspect anyone.”

“Okay, please be seated. I will call you back again.”

Mc called in Caroline and asked her when she was seated,

“You said Peter visited Jessica’s house very often, right?”

“Yes, I have seen him many times going into or coming out of her premises.”

“When did you see him last at her premises?”

“I saw him entering the premises at about eight in the morning on Monday.”

“Was Ron in the house?”

“No he was not.”

“How do you know that he was not home?”

“I saw Ron leaving at 7.30 in the morning.”

“Have you seen Ron and Peter together at any point of time previously?”

“May be, I have seen a couple of times. Mostly Peter used to visit her in Ron’s absence.”

“How long did he stay there?”

“May be, an hour.”

“Did he leave the house alone or with Jessica?”

“He left the house alone.”

“Madam, you may go now. I will call you back if need be. Thank you.”

Mc called in Peter when the police brought him to the police station for questioning.

“Officer, I don’t know anything about her. Why are you questioning me?”

“Take it easy. We are doing our duty. That is it.”

“Officer, I have nothing to do with this case.”

“Do you know one, Jessica?”

“I don’t know anyone of that name.”

The officer called in Caroline for identification.

“Caroline, have you seen this man before?”

Caroline looked at him and recognized him immediately.

“Yes, this man frequently visited Jessica.”

“Are you sure that he was the one who visited her house?”

“I am very positive.”

“Come on, Peter. Who was that woman, Janet or Jessica?”

“Her name is Jessica.”

“Why did you frequent her house?”

“I used to go there to meet Dr. Ron.”

“What was Ron doing there?”

“Ron had hired a house in Lincoln drive.”

“Who was living with him?”

“Jessica lived with him.”

“Now, what were you doing there in his absence?”

“I was paying courtesy calls. That is all.”

“Was there any special reason for your frequent visits?”

“She was in the last stage of her life. She was suffering from AIDS.”

“Was she dying?”

“Yes, she would have died of AIDS in a few days.”

“Did Ron know that she was dying of AIDS?”

“Of course, he knew.”

“What was she to you? Caroline says you used to enter her house with a latch key.”

“I was in love with Jessica. We used to meet there in the absence of Ron.”

“Ron says the lady’s name is Janet.”

“He is lying. She is Jessica, not Janet.”

“How long did you know her?”

“For the last eight years.”

“Did Ron know that you were in love with her?”

“Yes, Ron loved her and she loved me, perhaps.”

“Why did she stay with Ron then?”

“Perhaps she thought that she will be happy with him because he was rich. I was not earning enough to maintain her.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“She was my colleague. She was working in the same laboratory where I was working.”

“When did Ron meet her?”

“I don’t know how and where Ron met her. He started visiting her some six years ago. Day by day their friendship culminated into love and they started dating each other. I begged her not to forsake me. She said arrogantly, ‘you can’t look after me as well as Ron does, Peter, forget me.’”

“Did you forget her?”

“No, I could not. I started visiting her house in the absence of Ron.”

“Did she welcome you?”

“She always resisted me. She said that Ron is a dangerous guy who is capable of ruining both of us. Don’t come here please. But I did not listen. He became suspicious of our relationship.”

“Did he ever discuss this matter with you?”

“No, he did not. Instead, he started befriending me, and he often visited me in the laboratory. I was glad to meet him because his friendship would provide me an opportunity to sneak into Jessica’s house. One day he suddenly stopped meeting me in the laboratory. I was surprised that he was no more interested in my friendship. I continued to visit his house in his absence. One day he caught us red-handed in a compromising position in his house. I walked away but he did not pick up any quarrel with me. He let me go. A year ago, he told me one day, ‘Peter, Jessica has tested positive to HIV/ AIDS.’ I became so dejected, not only because she tested positive, but also because I thought that I too might have contracted HIV/AIDS through her. I ran to the laboratory and tested myself for HIV/AIDS and found out that I also tested positive. I am ruined. I may die anytime.” He said ruefully.

“Peter, when did you meet Jessica last?”

“I have not met her for quite sometime.”

“You are lying. We have found your fingerprints on the refrigerator. You were around in that house on the day of murder. Caroline has seen you entering the house.”

“Officer, I did not murder her, believe me.”

“Peter, take it easy. We are not saying that you murdered her. We are saying that you were in this house on the day she died. That is it.”

“It is true that I walked in with the help of latch key as usual three days ago. I searched for Jessica but I did not find her. I went to the fridge to drink some juice. I opened the fridge and Jessica’s body fell on me. I cried out hysterically for a few moments and then I realized that I will be the first suspect if I call the police. I pushed the body back into the fridge and ran away.”

“What time was it?”

“The clock was chiming eight in the morning.”

Mc asked Peter to wait outside for a while and called in Ron again.

“Ron you are a liar. You lied that her name is Janet. Peter says she is Jessica.”

“What does it matter whether she is Janet or Jessica? Alright, she is Jessica.”

“Who killed Jessica?” He asked Ron abruptly fixing his eyes on him.”

“I don’t know.”

“You killed her. You knew she was suffering from AIDS and she was dying. You gave her no medical advice.”

“She was about to die and she died. Nobody killed her. I think she died of AIDS.”

“No, you are misguiding the police. The autopsy has confirmed that she died of injury.”

“What kind of injury did she suffer?”

“She has been hit by a heavy object.”

“Who hit her?”

“That is what we want to know from you.”

“I don’t know. I was away from town for three days. She was alive when I left.”

“You must tell us how it happened?”

“I don’t know Officer. I have not killed anyone”

Mc called in Caroline.

“Madam, did you see Ron on Sunday morning?”

“I saw Ron going out at seven-thirty in the morning. I saw Peter getting out of his car at around 7.50 in the morning. When I looked out of the window at 8.30, the car was gone.”

“Did anyone else enter the premises?”

“I saw the thief entering the premises at three in the afternoon.”

“Okay, when did you see Ron in that house previous to that?”

“I went to see Jessica on Sunday morning at seven. Ron came out and said that Jessica was not home curtly. I thought by his demeanor that Jessica was there and he was lying.”

“Madam, you may leave now. You are a very important witness and you have to depose in the court. Good Bye.” She went out.

“Bryan, the case is getting more interesting. Ron leaves home at seven-thirty. Peter enters the house by 7.50. There is no evidence that anybody else entered the house in between. Peter sees Jessica’s body in the fridge. What do you conclude?”

“Ron murdered Jessica and hid the body in the fridge before seven-thirty. He immediately left the house on a tour. At 7.50 Peter innocently walked into the house and finds her body in the fridge. He pushes the body back to the fridge and runs away.”

“You guessed right. I will add something more to your story. Ron after murdering her called Peter on phone and left home before he came.”

“That is right, but why will he call Peter when he has committed the murder.”

“He called him to fix the murder wrap on Peter. There is evidence that Peter touched the body and left the fingerprints all over the house.”

“Caroline testifies that they had met each other sometime back and Ron bid him good bye in a friendly way. Ron himself has acknowledged that Peter is his friend.”

“There is another possibility. Ron may be speaking the truth. He left home at seven-thirty and Jessica was alive. Peter entered the house at 7.50 and murdered her. He placed the body in the fridge and walked away.”

“We will interrogate Peter on this matter. Call him in.”

Bryon called in Peter again.

“Is Ron your friend?”

“He has been friendly but I don’t know if he is my friend in deed.”

“Think it over and tell us if Ron has been nurturing any ill-will towards you. There was glee in his eyes when he said that you were suffering from AIDS. He may be pretending to be your friend.”

“I don’t know. I guess you are right. He can’t be my friend.”

Bryan announced that Ron’s girlfriend Janet was awaiting to be interrogated. Mc called her in.

“Jessica, what is your real name Jessica or Janet?”

“My name is Janet.”

“Who is Jessica?”

“Jessica was his girlfriend and my colleague, who has been since dead. He befriended Jessica when his wife left him years ago. Jessica got on well with him for a year and suddenly Ron noticed that Jessica was in love with Peter. I could see by his looks, thought and action that he was jealous of Peter. I thought Ron would fight with Peter, but strangely, he started befriending him. I guessed that Ron was up to some mischief and watched his movements whenever he came to meet Peter through a mirror hung on the wall. One day, when Peter went in to meet his supervisor, he stole something from his table and put it in his pocket. I didn’t know what he stole. He suspected that I might have noticed him stealing. To endear me, he started dating me, saying that he was going to marry me once he divorced his wife. I was alone, leading a lonely life and I accepted his offer to live with him. He kept me in his house under his watchful eyes. One day he told me that Jessica would die shortly, and that the court would grant him divorce from his first wife. I asked him cunningly how he knew that Jessica would die shortly. He did not reply. He gave a cryptic smile and kept quiet. Three days ago, he came home in great excitement and said,

“Jessica is dying shortly. Thank God. I didn’t kill her. She will die a natural death.” I believed him though he sounded weird.

“But there were marks of injury on her body. It was not a natural death. She has been murdered.”

“In that case, I don’t know what role Ron or Peter played in her murder.”

“Thank you, madam. We will come back to you after talking to other witnesses.” She went out.

Mc called in Peter for questioning again.

“Peter, did you have any sexual relation with anyone other than Jessica?”

“No certainly not. I loved only one woman that was Jessica.”

“Are you sure that you have contracted AIDS through Jessica?”

“There is no other possibility.” He mused for a while and said, I can guess what happened.”

“Guess.”

“I get it now, officer,” said Peter. “Once I was holding a syringe and a test-tube in my hand when he called on me in the laboratory. I told him casually that the test-tube contained blood contaminated with HIV/AIDS viruses. He had fixed his eyes on the test-tube maliciously when my supervisor called me in for giving some instruction, and when I returned, I found a syringe missing and the content in the test-tube was reduced to less than half of what I had left on the table. I was baffled, but I did not suspect him then.”

“I got it.” Mc shouted excitedly that stunned Bryan. “Ron stole syringe and the blood contaminated with HIV/AIDS and injected Jessica with that syringe. She let her die in what appears like a natural death, but it is a case of cold blooded murder. But,”

“What?”

“Peter, The post mortem report says that she died of an injury suffered from a flying object. There are two fingerprints on a bronze statuette lying by her side and one of them matches yours.”

“I did not kill her. Believe me please.”

“We believe you. Tell us what happened.”

“Four days ago, I entered her home quietly and went to her bedroom. She embraced me with both her arms tightly and started weeping, saying that she would die shortly. It was heart rending to see her

weeping over her impending death. I was fondling her all over the body to pacify her. A stranger quietly entered the house and stood before us. As soon as I saw him, he swiftly moved to the corner, picked up the statuette on the corner table and threw the statuette at me. It missed me and hit Jessica in the temple and she lay there motionless. I tried to catch him but he escaped, throwing some objects at me. I could not pursue him. I went to Jessica and placed her on her bed. Her pulsation had stopped. I knew she was dead. 'Ron was out of town for three days,' she had told me earlier. I loved her so much that I did not want to let her body decay. So I dragged the body to the fridge and with great difficulty huddled in the body in it and quietly walked out.

"Why didn't you inform the police?"

"I was afraid that police might arrest me if I informed them. I knew that I would be the first suspect if I had informed the police because the stranger killer had escaped."

"Now call Ron immediately." Mc ordered. Ron entered and sat down trembling

"Ron, do you have any enmity with anyone?"

"No I don't have enmity with anyone."

"Peter says that a stranger entered your house and threw objects at Jessica and she died of injury."

"I don't know anything about it. I didn't kill her, believe me"

"Who could that stranger be?" Ron said to himself, wondering at this unexpected revelation and thought that Peter might have killed her.

"We believe you Ron; you did not kill her with the statuette. Did you tell Peter at any time that Jessica was suffering from AIDS?"

"Yes, officer, I told him once that she was suffering from AIDS"

Ron sat there mutely wondering what Peter would have revealed to the police.

"Dr. Ron, the post-mortem report confirms that she was suffering from AIDS at the time of her death. Do you have AIDS?"

"No, I am healthy."

"How did she contract AIDS?"

“I don’t know. She never told me that she was suffering from AIDS. I examined her clinically a few months ago and found out.”

“Do you think that she died of AIDS?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she died of AIDS. In fact she would have died of AIDS in a few days.”

“Who could have given her AIDS?”

“Peter had AIDS. He was having physical relationship with Jessica. Jessica might have contracted AIDS from Peter.

“If it were natural death, why would anybody hide her body in the refrigerator?” Mc asked him quizzically.

Ron thought for a while and said slowly,

“It is a good point, officer.”

“Doctor, we have fixed the culprit.”

“Who is it? Who is it?” he asked nervously.

“You tried to kill Jessica, your girlfriend by injecting a syringe contaminated with HIV/AIDS because you suspected that there was physical relation between your girlfriend and Peter.

Hitting the ceiling, Ron shot back,

“Is it your conjecture or do you have any evidence to prove it?”

“Your girlfriend, Janet will vouch for it. How did she get AIDS?” Mc interrogated Ron. Ron thought he was at his wit’s end and confessed,

“I had injected blood contaminated with AIDS viruses into her body five years ago for five consecutive days.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I came home one night from the hospital, and as was my wont I opened the latch key and entered in. It was still seven in the evening. I heard someone whispering in a low tone. I went up the stairs and found my girlfriend, Jessica, with Peter. I became enraged, dejected and even disappointed. I loved her so much that I could not stand her infidelity. I wanted to pounce on them and kill both of them in bed, but wisdom prevailed upon me not take any hasty step and I recoiled myself without leaving any clue that I was there. They never had the faintest idea that I

knew what was going on in the house in my absence. I befriended the guy and asked him to keep coming to my house. He was emboldened by my seeming innocence and called on Jessica frequently. Sometimes I told Jessica that I would be going to the hospital but clandestinely stayed back to find out what they do at my back. I started visiting him in his laboratory and we became intimate. He used to show me how he would test blood for different diseases. One day he told me holding blood in a large test tube,

“Look, this blood is a sample of an AIDS patient. He is in his last stage. He may not live for more than three months. At that point of time, his supervisor called him in and he left me there alone. He did not come back for fifteen minutes. I took out a syringe there and drew some blood from the sample he had shown me, packed it in a cardboard box, kept it in my coat pocket neatly and carefully insulating it, and drove home directly. When I went home, Jessica was having high temperature, and she told me that she was feeling breathlessness. I got a good chance to use the syringe with her consent.”

“I told her that it was a serious disease and it must be treated immediately with a prick. I went to her and asked her to turn to the other side and pricked her with the syringe. I told her that she has to take five pricks in the next five days and she innocently submitted to my advice. I pricked her and transmitted the contaminated blood to her veins five times. I took revenge against her for her infidelity and let her die naturally. I befriended Jessica’s friend, Janet, who was dying for my love, and I started my new life together in a separate house at Bedford, awaiting her death. I knew that I was killing not one, but two persons, Jessica and her paramour, Peter. I wanted to kill both of them with one shot and god willed it. Peter will die within six months. Take me away to prison. I don’t care.”

“Wait Ron, I have one more question. She did not die a natural death. Who could have murdered her?” Mc asked him.

“I don’t know, really.”

“I get it now!” Mc exclaimed as he sprang from his seat. “Bryan, call Paul. How stupid we were to believe him. He is a habitual thief. He might kill anyone who encounters him while stealing. Peter might have seen him entering the house and out of fear Paul might have thrown statuette which came handy at Peter which accidentally fell on Jessica and killed her instantaneously.

“But Caroline and Neil said that he was running out of the house at three in the afternoon. If what Peter said is true the murder must have taken place around 8.30 in the morning.”

The autopsy report says that the death could have occurred between 8 and 8.30 in the morning.”

“We will know more about it when we question Paul. Bring him here. We have kept him in the cell.” Mc said to Bryan and relaxed for a while.

“Paul, you killed Jessica in her house on Monday by trespassing into her house.”

“I did not kill Jessica. It was an accident.” He said meekly.

“How did it happen?”

“I was released from prison last week. I was longing to meet Jessica for seven years. I went to the hospital where she was working to meet her. They told me that she was living with Ron in Lincoln drive. I waited on the road in front of her house for Ron to leave. He left at seven-thirty. I thought of entering the house but the next door woman was constantly watching the house. I went away to have my breakfast, and returned to the spot at eight-twenty. I entered the house thinking Jessica was alone. I did not know that someone else was in the house. I saw a man hugging Jessica, which provoked me at once. Enraged, I impulsively threw a bronze statuette that was placed on the table at him. He escaped unhurt but the statuette hit Jessica on her right temple. She collapsed and lay motionless on the ground. The man came after me and I ran away throwing at him whatever came handy. I sat in the wood behind the house for sometime and wept until my eyes became dry. When I consoled myself, I had a faint hope that she could be alive. I came back a few hours later to make sure whether she was dead or alive. I went in and searched for her. I did not find her anywhere in the house. I was thirsty and wanted to drink some juice. I opened the refrigerator and Jessica’s body fell on me. I ran out in panic. The next door neighbors caught me and handed over to the police.”

“What is Jessica to you?”

“She is my wife.”

There was silence in the room for a few moments when Paul cried out, “Take me to the gallows. I killed her.”

The cops removed him to a distance, and Peter stood up to leave.

“Wait a moment, please. I have one more question for you.” Mc said.

“I will answer all your questions.”

“Why did you frequent Ron’s place, Peter?”

“I told you that I loved Jessica.”

“Ron, why did Peter frequent your house although he knew that Jessica had AIDS?” Mc asked Ron in a remonstrating tone, fixing his eyes on him.”

“Officer, arrest Peter.” Ron appealed.

“On what charge shall I arrest him?” Mc shot back.

“Arrest him on the charge of blackmail and extortion. He frequented my house to blackmail me that he would inform the police that I injected contaminated blood to Jessica’s body if I didn’t pay him whenever he demanded money.”

“Arrest and take away Paul, Peter and Dr. Ron,” shouted Mc. Bryon immediately obeyed his order.

Mc looked out of the window, and the darkness gradually receded and sunshine came on. He drove down with Bryan to a nearby restaurant for breakfast.

Story Two

My Cup of Cappuccino

It was the third week of December and the weather was very cold. Phillip stopped his cab in the parking lot and entered a restaurant as he was badly in need of coffee. The clock was chiming eight and the restaurant was empty. He ordered cappuccino and waited for it at his table thinking of his dreary life. His father had brought him to America when he was seventeen and left him there when he went back to his country of origin, advising him seek his fortune there. Philip was driving a taxi to earn his living. He earned nearly two thousand dollars every month and managed to live on one thousand, an austere life, in an old dingy place, vacated by his friend who moved to a warmer place, and often wondered if he would ever earn enough money to marry and settle down in life. He had no friend or relative, and lived all alone waiting for better days.

He was sipping his coffee with gusto when a young lady entered rather hurriedly and sat on a chair nearby. She was in such a pensive mood that she did not pay attention to him and showed no inclination or interest to talk. Philip sat studying her anatomy and behavior as he drank coffee. She looked eighteen, bold and beautiful, a perfect figure with a round face. He felt an inner urge to talk to her but his timidity prevented him from taking initiative; and he sat there mutely until she finished her drink and left the restaurant. He came out of the restaurant and sat behind wheels; but he felt like resting there for a while. He recollected the image of the girl that visited the restaurant in his mind and wished he had spoken to her. She was the kind of girl who he would dream of marrying. He cursed his timid nature and decided to talk to her if he came across again. He was craving to meet her again and hoped to bump into her sometime. Two months lapsed but there was no sight of that girl. His memory began to fade and he could not recollect her face vividly. He stopped looking for her, as there was little chance of meeting her again. He calmly sat in his cab reading a novel waiting for a customer one morning, when his cab phone started ringing and he lifted the phone. It was a girl's voice, soft and smooth. "I need to get to the airport. Would you come immediately to this address in Euclid?" she asked giving her address.

“Oh! Sure. I will be there in a few minutes,” he said and hung up. In about fifteen minutes, he was in front of an old ranch home. A girl walked towards the cab, and as she approached the cab, Philip recognized her as the one whom he had seen in the restaurant. It was his dream girl. He was very eager to talk to her but he decided not to show his anxiety explicitly as he loaded her luggage into the trunk.

“I am a cab driver. Will she ever accept me as a friend?” he asked himself, shook his head in disapproval and started driving silently until they reached the airport. The girl collected her baggage and swiftly walked away, after paying the fare. Once she was gone, he turned to the back seat and saw that she had left her camera in the car. He pulled up the cab to the curb, ran after her and delivered the camera. She opened her purse, took out a ten-dollar bill, pushed it into his hands and said thanks. It was then that she raised her head and met his eyes.

“I am glad you are an honest driver. What is your name?” She asked.

“My name is Philip.” He said longing for recognition. She had already darted towards the reservation counter without waiting for his reply.

One Sunday morning, he was at a grocery store to purchase his daily needs when he heard someone talking to him from behind.

“Hi, how are you?” The voice was soft and vaguely familiar. He turned back, astonished, and saw his dream girl, standing over there.

“I am fine. How are you?” he was excited to talk to her.

“Good. Thank you. I came here to get some fruits and vegetables.” She said in monotone without any excitement.

“I came to get some milk.” He grinned and looked into her face. She was not looking at him.

“Where do you live?” She asked casually with a grim face.

“I live in a home development behind this store. It is a dingy place.” He said candidly.

“My place is no better,” she said consoling him.

“Are you new to this town?” he asked, not knowing how to continue the conversation

“Yes, I have been here for the last six months,” she said.

There was awkward silence for a while. She saw her friend Dora turning round the corner, and in great excitement, she walked away to greet her friend. He stood there, watching her hugging and talking to her friend vivaciously and wondered if she would really care for him

He met her again in the same grocery stores, a few weeks later and exchanged greetings.

“I am not taking out my taxi today.” He announced as a prelude to his talk.

“Why, have you made lot of money to laze away your time.” She taunted him humorously.

“Oh no, I need rest. I have been working fourteen hours a day,” he went on, gathering courage. “Come on, we will have lunch in a nearby restaurant together”

She considered for a moment and said hesitatingly ‘yes’. There was no expression on her face and she had hid her excitement from Philip.

They went to a nearby restaurant. When they were seated, he asked,

“May I know your name?”

“Dana is my name. What is your name?”

“I am Philip. What do you do for your living?” he asked her casually.

“I do house cleaning job in the neighborhood. I am a maid staff.” She said glumly without elaborating.

“Her situation must be worse than mine.” He said to himself. After a few seconds, he gathered more courage and muttered,

“I am paying 400 dollars for a dingy room. I wish I could find a partner who would share rent.”

“Really,” she said brightening up; I am also looking for a partner. I don’t mind sharing with you if you find a good house.” She said in no uncertain terms.

“Thank you, Dana, I will find a nice house for comfortable living.” He promised her as he bid good-bye.

Two weeks later, he called her up and went to meet her in her house. She treated him well, offered him some cookies and talked to him nicely.

He told her that he had found a nice two bed-room house for rent; she gave him her share of rent in advance after inspecting the house and satisfying herself. Both of them moved to the new house on the following Sunday.

He got up next morning very early, prepared coffee and offered it to her. She drank coffee and said, "You make nice coffee." He started cooking for her and she appreciated it

Three months passed by. He was mustering courage to propose to her at the right time. Every time he made up his mind to propose to her, something prevented him from doing so. His inner voice reverberated 'you are making a mistake. She does not need you.' She always brought home a friend of her, Dora who would stay with her till late evening. They always had so many things to talk about between themselves, that they paid little attention to his feelings. He did not find an occasion to talk to Dana leisurely even after staying with her for three months. Dana would be rushing to work in the morning and Dora would engage her in the evenings and week-ends.

One morning he got up from the bed, had a nice shower and dressed up.

"Oh, you are leaving home very early today." She remarked.

"No I am not. In fact I am not going for work. I want to spend sometime with you today. Why don't you stay back?"

"Why?"

"I have something to talk to you."

"Talk out. Why are you hesitating?"

"I love you, Dana."

"You are so naive. You want to stay back from work to say this. This is childish."

"Dana. I am serious. You say I am childish. You are brushing off my proposal without giving due consideration."

"I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you. But I don't love you." She said without any hesitation.

"Why?"

"I like you. I respect you, but I don't love you."

“I thought you did. I had built a castle in the air. I thought we would marry each other and build a happy home for us.”

“If wishes were horses beggars would ride, you know.”

“You are really very harsh on me.”

“Philip, you are my friend in need and I know you are a friend in deed. It is enough to live together.”

“Can’t you give me a better place in your heart?”

“I am sorry. I have no such feelings to you.”

“You like your friend, Dora more.”

“She is very special. Nobody can take her place.”

“What is so special about her?”

“I have no time to explain to you. I am getting late to my work.” She left him to himself and rushed to her room to dress up.

Next day Dora came home and Philip observed Dana’s reaction. She was so happy with her and so jovial. She talked to her with great interest and in high spirits. Philip was convinced that Dana does not care for him. He left the matter there for another two months.

One day she came home her eyes wet in the evening.

“Your eyes are swollen. Do you have pink eyes?”

“Philip, I want to die. I really want to die.”

“Why?”

“Dora went away to New York. I will never be able to see her again. This life is so disgusting without her.”

“I understand she was your dearest friend. You must be feeling very sad to part with her.”

She went to her room and closed the door.

Philip did not say anything but he tried to help her in every possible way. He used to sit with her and chat for long hours. He accompanied her wherever she went and did everything she wanted him to do. He gave up smoking and drinking for her sake as she had expressed her displeasure at smoking and drinking. Dana was very much pleased with him. One day he asked her,

“Dana, I would want to ask you the same question once again. Will you marry me?”

“Why are you so particular that I should marry you?” she asked crossly.

“I don’t know. I love you.” He affirmed with some hope.

“If you insist I will marry you but don’t complain later on that you made a mistake. I am not the kind of woman you would be happy with.”

“I am after all marrying a woman, right?”

“No doubt about it. But I am afraid you will not be happy.” She spoke with conviction.

“I will be happy. I will keep you happy too. Don’t unnecessarily worry yourself. Everything will be all right. We will fix a day, invite our friends, arrange a nice party and announce our engagement. We will get married in a boat at Aladdin and stay at Excalibur in Las Vegas. We will celebrate our honeymoon on a grand scale. I have saved 5000 dollars.”

“Philip, Stop dreaming and leave me alone.”

“I am longing for the last six months for that day, Honey.”

“I am tired. May be, I try my best to convince you some other time.”

Philip turned pale and said to himself, ‘She thinks she is doing me a favor.’ I don’t want any pity from her. I want her companionship. If she is not ready, I am also not.’ She started snoring and he went out of the room.

Philip made all efforts to rouse her sensual feelings but nothing worked. A few months lapsed and he was very disappointed at her frigidity. One day she came home in high spirits, which astounded Philip.

“You are in high spirits today. What is the matter?”

“Dora has come back to work with us. She is so cute. You must see her. She has grown a little bit fatter but she is still in good shape and size. I love her.”

“That is very good news. Bring her home tomorrow.” He said to please her.

“I will, I will. I invited her today but she postponed her visit till tomorrow. I did not insist on her coming today.”

Dana brought Dora home next day. They talked for long hours. Philip also joined them. Dana regained her spirits and once again became a normal person. With Dora coming home and befriending Philip, his spirits went high. Another three months lapsed, and Dora asked Philip one day,

“Philip, can I stay with you and Dana here. Dana has been pestering me to stay with her. I need your consent.”

“I shall be very glad if you can stay with us.”

“Thank you, dear,” she said as she gave an amorous look, a look that Dana never gave him.

There were only two rooms. She occupied Dana’s room. Thereafter, Dana and Dora stayed in the same room and it became difficult for Philip to meet Dana. Even when they met, she had no inclination to speak to him. Her world was Dora and she was there.

One evening she came home crying. Her eyes were red and swollen; her cheeks were wet with tears. She was very depressed and sad. Philip was surprised to see her so sad.”

“What happened? Why are you crying?”

“Dora is moving. She left the job this evening and she is leaving town tomorrow.”

“Why should you cry so much? Can’t you live without her?” He queried naively.

“I really find it hard to live without her. You will never understand how bad I am feeling. I feel like committing suicide.”

“Don’t worry Dana. I am here to give company. I am a man. You will really enjoy my company more.”

“Do you think so? I don’t. Nobody can take her place.”

Philip was raving mad at her insolence. He did not take his car out till evening and when the evening came on he went to a bar and drunk himself out heavily. It was past twelve when he came out of the bar and sat behind the wheel. He was so intoxicated that he jumped the signal and hit a pedestrian. Luckily for him, the pedestrian was not seriously injured but Philip in panic drove his car when the pedestrian stood up on his legs. He came home his body trembling in fear.

Next day the police came home and arrested him in connection with a case of drunken driving causing grievous hurt. Philip dithered as Dana and Dora stood looking on.

“Will you come to Police station with me, Dana? I am so frightened.”

“Sorry Philip, I have to go to work. I will surely come to the Police Station in the evening.”

“Will you release me on bail?”

“I will, Philip. Don’t worry.”

Philip waited for Dana till late night and she did not turn up. A month lapsed but still Dana was elusive. A friend of his went to the court to see Philip on the day he was to be sentenced, and Phillip wept like a child before him, and complained that Dana and Dora had not come to release him on bail.

“I see them frequently in malls and restaurants. They are enjoying their life to the maximum,” said his friend.

“Why are they so indifferent towards me?”

The clever friend said, “They are made for each other. You don’t fit into their scheme of things.” Philips blinked his eyes in great astonishment as he vaguely understood what his friend was alluding to. A few minutes later Dana and Dora appeared in the corridor of the court.

“Look, Dana and Dora are coming to you. It is surprising,” his friend told Philip. They walked along the corridor hurriedly without noticing Philip standing over there and went past Philip.

“Dana, my dear,” he called out. She turned to him and said,

“Oh my dear Philip, it is you. I am sorry I didn’t notice you.”

“I am glad that you have come to meet me at least today, the day of my judgment. I may be sentenced for two years in prison.”

“Philip, we did not come here to meet you. We are not here on a different purpose. I meet you some other time in prison.” She started to leave.

“Oh Dana, what is the matter? What has happened to you?”

“After you left, we petitioned to the police that they allow us to live

as spouses-Dora and me. They refused and filed a case against us instead. We have come to petition to the court to allow us to live together as spouses.” They walked away, their high-heeled shoes tapping the floor and their buttocks swaying, hither and thither.

Philip sat in the court hall so amused that he did not listen to the judgment passed in his favor. “You are acquitted, Philip, Congratulations.” His friend greeted him in great excitement. The police released Philip and let him go. Next morning Philip went to Dana rather reluctantly, to collect his belongings and bid good-bye. As they turned round the corner, they noticed an ambulance and two police cars in the driveway. They wondered what the police were doing there and waited by the roadside. The police brought Dana and Dora on stretchers to the ambulance. In great consternation, Philip asked a neighbor what the matter was. He broke the news that Dana and Dora had attempted to commit suicide as they lost a case in the court. Philip stood there flabbergasted.

When the police left the place Philip opened the door and went in. He collected his belongings and left the place to live with his friend. A few days later he shifted his business to New Jersey.

A few years later he saw Dora with her husband and two kids.

“Hi, Dora, how are you doing?” He asked her when her husband was busy looking at a shop window.

“I am doing pretty well. How are you doing?” she enquired.

“I am surprised to see you. I thought you were.....”

“Dead no, I survived but Dana died. I have not told my husband about that incident. Perhaps I will never be able to tell him. I want to keep it a secret.”

Her husband was approaching them. Dora suddenly bid good bye and left the place without introducing her husband to Philip. Philip slowly walked away musing over the past.

The End

Story Three

Twilight zone

On a bright sunshiny morning, John lay glumly in bed thinking of the tough life ahead. It was his last day at work and he would return home retired on a pension of 3000 Rupees a month, which would not be enough to meet both ends. He had to repay out of his gratuity the loan which he had already borrowed for celebrating the marriage of his elder daughter, Mona. He had worked as a clerk for thirty years of his life and had reached the dead end of his career, still hoping for better days, which always eluded him. Barbara, his eighteen-year-old younger daughter, was yet to finish her bachelor's degree. Dennis, his wife, laying in bed in semi coma stage, was counting last days of her otherwise long dreary life, waiting to be admitted to a hospital soon. Reluctantly he got up from his bed and went to bathroom to take shower, and when he had finished, he dressed up and started to leave home. Barbara interrupted him and asked,

“Papa, will you stay back? Mom's condition appears to be worse today.”

“Sorry, Barbara, I can't stay back. Today is the last day at my office and I must go. I will come back home a little early in the evening. Don't worry. From now on I will be by her bedside always and take care of her. Okay?”

“Okay Papa, I will manage till evening. Come back as early as you can.”

“You can count on my words.” He assured her and hurried to school on his old bicycle.

The management gave him a warm send off in the evening with a silver handshake and he peddled his bicycle towards home as fast as he could. As soon as he turned round the corner of his street, he saw a throng in front of his house. He guessed something had gone wrong.

“Dennis, he shouted and ran into the house. Dennis was lying dead and Barbara was standing by her bedside, sobbing. He sank into a chair

unable to bear the grief. One of their neighbors called Mona, who was staying with her husband Joe in America on phone, and informed her of her mother's demise. Mona landed at Bangalore two days later and attended the funeral. When the days of mourning were over, they sat on the terrace of their house discussing the future course of action.

"Mona, I am now a retired man. I spent all my lifetime saving on your wedding. I am virtually penniless. Barbara is yet to be married and her education is not over. I cannot manage this family with a pension of 3000 a month. I am in deep trouble. I don't know what will become of us."

"Don't worry Dad, I will not let you go to streets or let you die starving. I have already thought about it. Come to America and stay with us. Yesterday I spoke to Joe over the phone and he has agreed to host both of you in America. Get ready to go in about two weeks' time. You will apply for green card when you get there. Barbara is really beautiful. She will study there and marry guy of her choice. Eventually, you both will settle down in America."

"Your idea is good. There can't be a better opportunity to settle down in America. Even otherwise, Barbara has been longing to visit America. We can forget our worries and spend a few months on the other side of the world amidst new people and different culture. But is Joe serious about this arrangement?"

"Yes, he is. He is gem of a person. He knows that that our family is in distress and he is ready to help us out. In fact, we need you too now as much as you need us. I am carrying a child in my womb and I need help till the child is delivered."

"But we can't afford the luxury of a foreign tour at this point of time. We are passing through a bad patch in life."

"We are aware of your meager financial standing. We wouldn't have proposed this tour, if we had no idea of financing it. We are ready to bear all your expenses. Joe is doing very well. Tina is already three years old and it is a great experience for you to watch her grow. I assure you that you really enjoy her company."

"Mona, can you arrange for our visa." John said assenting to her invitation. Barbara opposed, saying,

"Mona, I am in the middle of my Bachelor's degree course. I can't come to America before the summer vacation starts."

“We can’t wait for summer. It is a very bizarre and sticky situation. Barbara, I advise you to repeat the same course next year, if you have to come back.” Mona consoled her.

Barbara considered for a moment, and finally decided to go with Mona and John. Within two weeks time everything was arranged, and they all left for Chicago. Mary and John sat in the first row and Barbara, in the hind row on the plane. When the plane was about to close its door, a young man in his early twenties came in and sat next to Barbara.

“I am Joseph. I am going to Chicago.” He gave a broad smile as he introduced himself when the plane had zoomed into the air, “May I know whom I am talking to.”

“My name is Barbara. I am also going to Chicago.”

“How long do you stay in Chicago?”

“I am going there to stay for four months. If we get Green Card we may stay there permanently.”

She hesitated to speak to him and she turned away from him, but a little later, she changed her mind and spoke to him comfortably,

“How long do you stay in America?”

“I am working there for the last two years.”

“So you are a permanent resident.” She uttered with some satisfaction.

He was a bit agitated and became silent. An hour later he asked her,

“Where do you stay in Chicago?”

“At Devon Avenue and you?” she shot back.

“Westside,” he answered.

When they were waiting for embarking the plane at the Heathrow airport he sat by her side for a chat in the lounge.

“Where do you stay while at Bangalore?”

“I live in Frazer Town.”

Barbara turned to him and asked abruptly,

“Are you living with your family?”

“I am not married yet...”

“Which is your place of origin?”

“South Kanara”

Mona turned to Barbara and gestured to her not to talk.

“Why?” she asked in whisper

“No body talks to a stranger. Be quiet.”

Joseph heard her and kept quiet. At Chicago, he waved her before leaving the airport and she reciprocated it.

Joe received them at the Hopkins’ airport and brought them home. On the way he showed them the downtown when they were passing through. Barbara was thrilled to see the skyscrapers, wide roads and orderly traffic.

Three months elapsed like three days, and Barbara enjoyed every bit of her stay. Joe took them on tours and they enjoyed every place they visited. One morning when Barbara got up she heard Mona moaning and wriggling in pain. She awakened John as Joe had left the house for office. Both of them sat by her and enquired,

“Are you okay? Why are you moaning, Mona?”

“I am having severe pain in stomach. I need to see my Doctor immediately. Get me telephone, if you don’t mind.”

Barbara ran down the stairs and brought a cordless phone. With great difficulty she spoke on phone for an appointment with her doctor as John sat there, perplexed.

When she hung up the phone, she said,

“Papa, get ready to go to hospital. I have appointment at ten.”

“May I come with you Mona?” Barbara offered.

“Of course, you are coming with me. Get dressed up.”

They waited for the doctor Alka who examined Mona for half an hour as John and Barbara waited outside anxiously.

“We have to do an operation immediately. Admit her to the hospital.” The doctor advised them. Barbara called Joe on phone for advice, and on his advice, admitted her to the hospital. Joe arrived a little later and signed the papers to facilitate immediate operation. The doctor performed the operation as John, Joe and Barbara anxiously waited outside for two hours. The doctor returned to Joe with a pale face to inform that the patient died.

“Tina is orphaned,” wept Joe.

The funeral was over and they mourned her loss for a fortnight. One Sunday morning they were sitting on a couch in the family room with Joe.

“Joe, we seek your permission to leave for India.” John asked bowing down his head in sheer restlessness.

“You can here to stay permanently, right.”

“Now the situation is changed. If Mona were alive she would have applied for our Green Card and we would have stayed back.”

“That is true. I can’t apply for your Green Card.”

“That is why we have decided to get back to India. We are not destined to stay here.”

“How could you think of going back to India leaving behind your dear grand daughter, Tina?” protested Joe.

“We don’t want to leave Tina here in this condition. We want to take her to India if you have no objection. You can take her back before she attains eighteen.”

“She won’t agree to stay away from me. I can’t leave her even for a moment.”

“We understand your problem. Please try to understand our problem. We have visa to stay here for four months. Mona brought us here to help us settle down, but she left us abruptly leaving a void. We will never be able to console ourselves even if we stay here. Now we are mourning two deaths in the family.”

“I am very sorry that you have to suffer so much in the evening of life.” Joe consoled John.

“Thanks for your concern. We seek your permission to leave.” John insisted.

Joe became silent for a while and hung his head down thoughtfully. He slowly raised his head after a while and said in an uncertain voice.

“I need your help now. Don’t go away, please.”

“How long can we stay here? Our visa is valid for another two months.”

“Please stay for another two months. We will think of some plan that is acceptable to all of us.”

“We can’t stay beyond two months.”

“I know. We will find a solution.”

Joe left the place and John sat there worried. Barbara’s reaction was mixed. She would not mind staying for a few more months but her heart was in India. She had to get back to India to pursue her studies.

One more month lapsed and Tina became well acquainted with Barbara and followed her wherever she went. Barbara had to give her food. She had to sleep with her telling her bedside stories. She needed Barbara every moment of her life. On a Saturday night, they went to Pizza Hut for dinner. When they were waiting for the pizza to arrive, John announced.

“We are planning to contact airline for confirmation of our travel on 30th of this month.”

“Please don’t. You can’t leave Tina like this and go away. She needs you.”

“But our visa is expiring by this month end.”

“I have thought of a solution.” He said resolutely

“There is no solution to this problem”

“Every problem must have a solution. I have one.”

“What is it?”

“Marriage”

“Yes. We have no objection to your marrying a girl of your liking. Still fifteen days are left for our departure. If you have any girl in my mind, tell us. We will arrange for your marriage before we leave.”

“I have Barbara in my mind. She can take the place of Mona, and in my opinion, only Barbara can take care of Tina properly.”

Barbara hissed, raising her head like a cobra and stood up from her seat as if she was stung by a scorpion, saying,

‘Impossible’

“Joe, Barbara is very sensitive and sensible too. She does not want to marry Mona’s husband. She feels offended because she accepts you as her brother-in-law, not as a husband. She is fifteen years younger than you, and she may like to marry a young person. This marriage can’t take place.”

“Barbara, don’t take any hasty decision. That is the only way you can stay back in America. I will sponsor you as my wife. Your father may get Green Card as soon as you get your citizenship. It is just my suggestion. She may accept it or reject it. I thought it is in your interest and in Barbara’s interest too.”

“I can’t marry you just to settle down in America. I have my own aspirations in life.” She went out.

“You have to convince her. She is too young to understand the reality of the situation.”

“I understand. Thanks for your offer. I will consult Barbara and come back to you.”

Barbara waited for them in the car. They ate pizza and came out. She turned away from Joe and Joe drove home quietly.

That night Barbara and John were talking for a long time.

“Barbara, Joe has proposed to marry you. What do you think of this proposal?”

“Papa, Joe is very possessive. He wants to get hold of anything he wants. He does not care for others’ feelings. I don’t want to marry him.”

“Why don’t you marry him? It solves everybody’s problem, yours, his and mine. I am not forcing you. It is up to you.”

“He is not young, Papa. He is thirty-six and I am twenty-one. How could he think of marrying a girl, fifteen years younger to him?”

“Barbara, look at our situation. You are twenty-one and your father is penniless. We have no money to meet your marriage expenses. There is nobody home to find a suitable match for you. On the other hand if you marry Joe, you will have a wonderful life here. Think it over.”

“Papa, my decision is final. We are going back India as scheduled.” She went out of the room. John was confused. He went to bed and soon he was in deep sleep.

They got ready to go back and Joe made no attempt to retain them. He admitted the child to daycare and brought the child back at six while returning home from work.

On the day of departure, they flew to Bombay en route to Bangalore. Barbara returned sorrowful because of two deaths in the family. She

waited for the college to reopen so that she could repeat the course again. Two months lapsed and the summer was gone and monsoon rains started pouring down. She prepared herself to go to college the next day, the date of reopening of the college.

Six months lapsed without any incident and she was trying to forget the two bereavements she had suffered. One day John had his meal as usual and went to bed a little early. She was reading a novel till late in the night and fell asleep around midnight. She was suddenly awakened at two in the morning by a thud. She heard her father groaning in agony on the floor. He was paralyzed and mutely laying there for help. She helped him to the bed and called out the neighbor who agreed to take John to the hospital in his car. Next day the doctor after conducting some tests reported that his kidney had failed and asked if she was rich enough to spend at least five hundred thousand for kidney transplantation. She expressed her inability to finance the operation and the doctor said that he would die in a few weeks. She was weeping all the time until one morning he went to coma and by evening his condition further deteriorated and by next morning he lay in the hospital bed dead.

She sent words for her relatives but no one came to see her or her dead father. She informed a few of John's friends of his death but no one turned up. At last a Samaritan who was mutely watching her plight came forward to help her. He called a municipal van and the hospital staff helped her to place the body in the van. The great Samaritan accompanied her to the graveyard where the body was buried, and he brought her back in a cab.

She sat in the corner of the house and wept for days together. No one came forward to help her in distress. At last she spoke to Joe over the phone and he advised her to fly back to Chicago and sent her ticket to fly to America. She was in Chicago in a span of two months. He gave her all facilities she needed for her living. A few months lapsed and she developed lot of love and respect for Joe. She was convinced that he was not the kind who would abuse her or take advantage of her helplessness. She felt at ease in his house. One evening he called her to accompany him to a community gathering and she agreed to go with him. She came across Joseph whom she had met in the plane some months ago.

“Hi Barbara, do you remember me?”

“I am trying to recollect...”

“We traveled together from India some months ago.” He reminded her.

“Oh Yes. I remember you. We had met some months ago. I was here to help my sister at the time of her delivery.”

“How old is the baby now?”

“She died leaving her first child, Tina. I thought I should look after the child at this critical juncture. Joe can’t help her much because he has to go to work from morning to evening.”

“That is true. You could be of great help to him. How is your father doing?”

“He died three months ago in India.” Both remained silent for a while.

“You had told me that someone had to sponsor your green card. Did your employer agree to sponsor you?” She asked to change the subject.

“No, still my fate is hanging precariously in suspense.”

“I wish you best of luck.”

“Thank you. Bye, bye.”

“Bye, bye.” He went away to talk to someone else.

When he left her she suddenly felt very lonely.

‘He is so humble and effeminate. He is the kind of man who can keep me happy. If he proposes to me, I shall be very happy,’ she thought.

Barbara wished he would come back to talk to her but he was too busy talking to other acquaintances.

One evening she was going round a mall when she saw Joseph coming in her direction. She thought he would talk to her but he was busy picking up some stuff from the stand, and did not notice her presence. She called him by name and he looked up.

“Sorry, I did not notice you.” He apologized and asked. “How are you doing?”

“I am fine and how are you?”

“I am busy these days. I have lot of touring to do. I scarcely get time to meet people. I thought that I should meet you but I had no time.”

“I expect you to call on us at our house sometime.”

“Of course I will, one of these days.” He sought permission to leave.

A few days later he called her on phone and informed her that he would be visiting her next day. She was very glad that he accepted her invitation.

Barbara was waiting for Joe that evening and she was in full spirits. She wanted to communicate to him that Joseph will visit their house the following day. Joe came home a little late and looked a little restless. His behavior was weird and he was not sure of what he was talking. He came to her and asked her,

“We will eat out tonight, okay?”

“I shall be glad to eat out in some restaurant as I am bored sitting at home.”

“Where shall we eat?”

“Where ever you take me.”

Joe was immensely pleased. When they were sitting in a restaurant, he suddenly held her by hand and said,

“What have you decided? Did you consider my proposal?”

“That I thought was a closed chapter!” There was surprise in her voice. Joe was taken aback by her reply.”

“No, Barbara, the proposal still stands and I am still waiting for your reply.”

She was bewildered and became silent. When they came out of the hotel, she said abruptly,

“Do you know why I am so glad?”

“Yes, you are glad that I renewed my proposal to marry you once again. You thought perhaps that I would not renew that proposal.” He said, deliberately misinterpreting her.

She wanted to inform Joe that she was interested in Joseph but she thought that it was not proper to hurt him and decided to keep the matter to self. Next evening Joseph visited their house and Joe was astonished that he should have come home without prior notice. Barbara was glad that he came and did everything she could to keep his spirits high. Joe was upset

that she was paying more attention to Joseph than was necessary, and put up a somber composure. He occasionally joined the conversation but Barbara spoke with great vivacity and showed her skill in conversation that surprised Joe who all these days thought that she was reticent and non-communicative. She prepared delicious dishes for her guest and served him with utmost care and interest. Tina started weeping because Barbara was not giving her attention. At last Joe lost his cool and shouted at her,

“You shouldn’t be so insensitive to the feelings of Tina. She is so bored but you are so indifferent.”

“I am sorry, Joe, I am not Mona to take garbage from you. I am not your maid servant, nor her au pare. I am doing service to you because you’re my brother-in-law and she is my niece,” she retorted losing her cool.

Joe was now enraged and spoke curtly,

“I thought you were thankful to me for the favors, I have been showering upon you, but you think that you are under no obligation to either of us. I am sorry I am not inclined to help ungrateful people like you. You can pack up and get back to India.” He rose from his chair and went into his room.

“I am sorry, Joe. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Excuse me, please,” she apologized and went behind him to console him.

“You may book your ticket and leave by the earliest plane.” He repeated as he walked out with Tina, leaving Joseph and Barbara.

When he was gone, Joseph felt very sorry for Barbara.

“I am very sorry, Barbara, you did upset Joe by inviting me home.”

“I am sorry Joseph that Joe spoiled your mood.”

“I am sorry not because he put me to awkward situation but because you lost his support.”

“God is great. He protects everyone. Don’t bother about me.”

“Barbara, I know Joe well. He will never excuse you. He will force you out of this house. If you have no place to go you can walk into my house and stay with me until you make further arrangements for your stay.”

“I will call you on phone, Joseph, if I need any help. Thank you for your magnanimous gesture.”

Joseph took leave of her and walked to his car.

A few months passed by without any untoward event although the relationship between Joe and Barbara was strained.

One night, when Barbara served the dinner, Joe asked her,

“The time has come when you have to take a decision. You must marry me or quit this house.”

“I prefer to quit the house.” She announced and went to her room.

Three days later she called Joseph on phone.

“Could I speak to Joseph?”

“Yes, Speaking.”

“Hi, this is Barbara. I need to meet you at once.”

“I am very busy right now. Can you give me a call in the evening?”

“It is urgent. I have a problem and that needs to be addressed immediately. You must find time.”

“Okay then, meet me as early as possible.” He hung up without waiting for her reply. She was bemused to hear him talk so indifferently. She thought he must be preoccupied with a serious problem. She was chiming his doorbell in forty minutes. He opened the door and called her in. When they were seated, she observed that his face had turned pale and he was really distressed.

“What is the matter, Joseph, Are you okay?”

Joseph broke down and started crying helplessly.

“Joseph, what happened? Why are you crying? I thought you would support me but I find you in a worse situation. Console yourself.”

He stopped crying, controlled himself and spoke calmly.

“Our company is merged with another company and the new company has planned to fire 10,000 employees from the job. If I become jobless, I may have to leave this country.”

“You can find another job. That is not a big deal.”

“I don’t have a green card. No body will sponsor me. The time has come when I have to get ready to go back.”

“Don’t worry. We will think what best we can do. Cheer up.” He cheered up in a few minutes.

“Instead of listening to your problems I am boring you with my problems. I am sorry. You wanted to speak to me urgently, right?”

“Yes, the matter is urgent. Joe wants me to quit immediately. I need a place to live. Can you arrange one for me?”

“I don’t know anyone who can help you out. I am sorry. I may have to go back to India. I think you too should go back with me.”

“I am not going back. I don’t let you go back. We will stay back. God sees the truth but waits.”

“It is nice of you. I don’t want to get back to India either. You leave Joe and stay with me. We will face what is to come together.” Both of them went together to Joe’s house and collected her belongings.

“Joe, I am leaving you. Take care. Bye.” She uttered without turning to him. Joe turned away and remained silent, as they drove away.

Barbara did not get any job for three months and she was ready to do any job for her living. She saw an advertisement in the newspaper that a live-in housekeeper was required for a family. She contacted the advertiser and agreed to work for his family.

That night Barbara spoke to him,

“I am joining as a house keeper.”

“Are you so desperate for a job?”

“Yes I am. I don’t think a woman will be respected unless she stands on her own legs. I can’t live out of your earnings.”

“I have no problem if it were office job. I don’t want you to work for a household.”

“I have no choice. My employer has agreed to sponsor me for Green card. I must work for him until I get Green Card.”

He was not pleased but he kept quiet. She started working for a family of two, Andrew and Audrey. Andrew was a very rich man and owned two companies. Audrey, his wife was in death-bed and she died

within a month. Andrew was rudely shaken by his wife's death and mourned her loss for a few months. When he had regained his spirits, Barbara told him,

"I can't work for you from tomorrow. You have to find someone else."

"Why? What happened?"

"I got an employment in a bank."

He held her hands firmly and said,

"Barbara, I am deeply disturbed by loneliness and bereavement. You should not quit the job at this juncture. I need you." He requested her and she decided to work for him. Joseph was not pleased with her decision. He repeatedly asked her to quit the job but she refused.

"Barbara, you know how disgraceful it is to work for a widower in his home."

"I know Joseph but he is a very nice gentleman. I am quite homely with him. He never bothers me. He treats me with respect."

"One day he will rape you. Be careful."

"He is not that kind of a person. I am confident he will do no such nonsense. He is not a flirt."

"I have been asking you to quit but you are blatantly disobeying me. I am building a castle in the air but you are trying to demolish."

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"I still hope that I will stay in America and marry you. We will set up a family, build a family and enjoy life. You are on the other hand, trying to work for a widower who will make your life miserable. I can't marry you if you work for him. You should quit the job or I quit you."

"I thought by living in a foreign country, you have developed a broad outlook. You are no better than the narrow-minded people who live in the narrow lanes of India. You will try to dominate me in every walk of life, and if you can't, you will not hesitate to assault me. We are just friends but you want to blackmail me. I don't submit to your threats."

"I am not threatening you. I mean what I say. I am quitting you."

“Okay, if the choice is between quitting the job and quitting you, I would rather quit you. I need independence, not slavery.”

“In that case, please, quit my house.”

Next day she spoke to her employer if she could stay in his house.

“By all means,” he said. “I am bored without company. I would have asked you one of these days if you could stay in.”

Next morning when Joseph left home for work, she collected her belongings and went away to live with Andrew.

Joseph came home calling, “Barbara, I have brought very good news. There is no need to work in anybody’s house. I have been confirmed in my job.” He did not get any response. He searched up and down, here and there, and every where. He did not find her anywhere in or around the house. He did not have her employer’s address either. A pall of gloom fell on his otherwise mirthful face. He lay on his couch and sobbed. He launched a hunt for her but he did not succeed in finding her whereabouts. Days passed but there was no sign of Barbara. Months went by and years rolled by but Barbara was gone from his life for ever.

Twenty years lapsed. Joe was working for a big company. One morning his supervisor told him,

“There is a rumor that you are going to become the president of this company.”

“What? Are you joking?”

“No, really I heard someone mentioning your name as a successor of the present President.”

“It could be someone of my name,” he suggested.

“It could be. That is possible.”

A few weeks later, the President of the company called him to his office. Joe started dithering as he thought that he may be asked to quit. He braced himself to hear the worst, as it was his thirteenth job in the last twenty years. He was craving for stability that always eluded him. When he went in, there saw a lady, seated next to the President. He was so frightened that he would be asked to quit that he was thinking of seeking a week’s time to quit.

“Meet Barbara, our Chairperson.”

The President introduced him to the middle-aged lady. He looked at her and identified her. It was Barbara. He wondered what Barbara was doing there and feared that if she could influence the President, she would ask him to fire him. Now he gathered courage, stood erect like a snake sensing impending danger.

“Joe, where had you disappeared all these years?” Barbara asked, cajoling him. Joe became mollified.

“I was working in Chicago, Las Angelis and Florida.” He said sitting on a chair.

“How long have you been working for this company?”

“Three years since.” Now he was leaning back in his chair.

“You are the luckiest man, Joe.” The President interposed. “Barbara has promoted you to the top position of the company. I am retiring this week and you will be the President.”

He sat bewildered at the sudden turn of events.

“Sit down comfortably, Joe. We have much to discuss.” Barbara said when the President left the place.

“Thank you, Barbara.” He muttered meekly. She nodded her head acknowledging his thanks.

“Take charge next Monday. I am sure this company is safe in your hands.”

“Barbara, tell me how did this all happen?”

“I was working for Andrew, the owner of this company and his wife as a house keeper after I left your house. His wife was on her deathbed and she died within a month. I worked for him till the end of his life. He died last year leaving all his assets to me in his will. I stepped into his estates.”

“I thought that such things could happen only in films. I am glad it happened to you.”

“It made a lot of difference in my life.”

“Tell me why you selected me for this prestigious post.”

“Well, a friend in need is a friend in deed. You helped me once when I was in need. You are my friend in deed. Time has come when I have to repay my debts to you.”

“Aren’t you angry with me?”

“Why should I be angry with you?”

“Because I displayed chauvinistic behavior and ordered you to leave my house.”

“Anybody in your situation would have reacted as sharply as you did. Your reaction was very natural.”

“Where is Joseph now, any idea?” He asked her inquisitively.

“I have made him the President of another company.” She replied somberly.

“So, you were not angry with him too?”

“How could I be angry with him? He was the one who provided me shelter when I had none and always wished me well. He tolerated my rebelliousness as much as he could. He was really great.”

“What is your next plan?”

“Now that I have placed my workers and company in safe hands, I prefer to go back to India and live in peace the rest of my life.”

She gave a sealed letter to him and said,

“Don’t open this letter unto my death. Keep it in safe custody.”

“Sure, I will,” he said keeping the letter in his wallet. “But what is it?”

“That is my will. If I die and you survive me, you will own this company, and Joseph will own my other company.”

“You are much younger than both of us. Why do you think that you would die and we survive?”

“I am dying of cancer. I don’t have much time. I am waiting for His call,” she said pointing her fingers to the sky above, referring to the God, and walked away towards the parking lot as Joe stood like a statue, his eyes following her as far as they could.

The End

Story Four

My life was short but not sweet

The first event that Mary could recollect from her memory always bothered her when she grew up to adolescence. She had just learnt walking around when one day, her mom, Elizabeth came home carrying some vegetables in a basket and Henry, her father shouted at her; and a verbal dual ensued which ended up in her father slapping her mom in her face. She was dumbly watching the entire incident that lasted in her estimate for more than an hour, excerpts of which she retained in her memory for the rest of her life

“Where had you been?”

“I went out to get some vegetables.”

“I know where you had been.”

“Then why do you ask me?”

“You are a liar. You had been to Isaac’s house. He called you over the phone and you went there to meet him but you lied to me that you were going to bring vegetables.”

“I deny your allegation. I did not go to meet Isaac or anyone. I went out to get vegetables.”

“Does it take three hours to fetch vegetable from a market that is two furlongs away?”

“I met my friend, Pricilla on my way... We were talking for more than an hour. She was narrating the harrowing experiences she was having with her husband. I could not discourage her for it was a heart rending episode.”

“You must have advised her to divorce her husband I believe.”

“Yes, I advised her so, as she had no other option.”

“I want you to quit my house at this very moment.”

“Why should I?”

“I have no place for an unfaithful wife in my house.”

“I am not going anywhere. I have no other place to go.”

“Then stop flirting with Isaac.”

“I did meet Isaac. He is a gentle man to the core, a friend, guide and philosopher. You must be insane to cast such caustic remarks. You need to be kept in an asylum.”

“How dare you call me mad?” He pounced upon her and hit her in her face. Her nose started bleeding. She ran out of the house, her nose bleeding to escape from his atrocious bashing. He could not follow her because she had bolted the door from outside. She went to the terrace and stood there weeping for three hours in the hot sun. Mary followed her to the terrace and wept loudly for, she knew that something was wrong in the house but she was too young to know what was wrong at that point of time.

A few days later, another incident occurred. One day Isaac came to the house and Eliza prepared coffee for him. They were talking for a long time and suddenly Henry entered the house. Isaac went to greet him but enraged Henry refused to reciprocate and went into his room closing the door behind him. Isaac felt it was such an awkward situation that he left her house immediately. When he was gone, John started beating Eliza and Mary started screaming, being frightened at his atrocious countenance and the neighbors came running to see what went wrong. Some of them advised Eliza to report the matter to the police but she refused to heed to their advice, and they all left after pacifying them. It was an ugly incident, as the neighbors had intervened, some supporting Eliza and others supporting Henry; culminating in serious argument between the neighbors themselves over the abuse of wife. A day later, Henry expressed regret over the shocking incident to Eliza but they were disgraced in the neighborhood due to estranged relationship and uncivilized behavior.

“I am sorry, Eliza. I should not have been so rude to you. I don’t know why I lose my patience as often as I do. Anyway the time has come when you have to take an important decision.”

“I cannot take any decision. Our problem has no solution. Even God can’t help us.”

“Why are you so pessimistic? Every problem has a solution. I have a suggestion for you.”

“What is it?”

“You get back to your parents and divorce me. I assure you that I will not contest your petition. You are still twenty-four and beautiful. Marry some one and live happily. It is your happiness that we want to look forward to.”

“How can I leave you alone? You can’t cook your food. You can’t wash your clothes. How can I desert you and get back to live a comfortable life?”

“Leave me to my fate and get going. I am destined to suffer throughout my life like this. Nobody can help me. Please leave.”

“No, I don’t because I can’t do that. It is unfair to break the marriage oaths. We have married taking vows and oaths to live together for the rest of our life, in riches and rags, in pain and pleasure. Don’t ask me to be unfair to you.”

“We did not anticipate this eventuality when we were married. It is a very strange situation. Get away and be on your own. Shall I book a ticket for you to Delhi?”

“No. I am not going anywhere. I stay with you. My father is old and infirm. My mother died last year. My brother is still unemployed. There is nobody that I can bank on.”

“You can remarry someone like Isaac and live a happy life.”

“Nobody will marry a divorcee. They cast an evil eye on me and make my life miserable. That is it.”

“Thousands of women live lonely life around the world. It is not so difficult to live alone.”

“This is India and lonely women are not safe. Indecent people knock at their doors, rowdies harass them, neighbors seduce them, robbers murder them and employers explicitly ask for sexual favor. The police, who have to give protection to the destitute women intimidate, threaten and rape them in police station. Politicians and officials are corrupt, courts are abominably slow and judges are tainted. Who will protect lonely women?”

“I have no answers for your questions. All I can say is that you are free to go whenever you wish.”

“I know your nature. To day you talk as a saint and tomorrow you will fight like a demon. I have no place to go. Forget it.” She went to her

room and closed doors behind her. Whenever Eliza wanted to weep to her heart-content, she bolted her room from inside. Mary would sit on a chair opposite to her room and wait endlessly for her return with tears in her eyes.

Mary started going to school at six and she was graded in the school as the most intelligent and the best student. She always scored 4.2 GPA and the teachers liked her more but she was feeling always sad, overwhelmed by a sense of insecurity and uncertainty; which was further aggravated by the hostile neighbors and unfriendly classmates. She had no friends at school or in the neighborhood and she grew up depressed and her depression reached an alarming point whenever her parents quarreled. Her parents used to go out to work and they had no time for Mary. Mary did not like them and preferred to stay away from them as far as she could.

At thirteen, she had developed a sort of dislike for the people and the society but she could not figure it out why she was so. She did not like or respect the society that did not like or respect her and the gap between her and the society went on widening until she willfully flouted the norms of the society in which she lived. She gradually realized that no neighbor quarreled as vehemently as her parents did, and her family was the only one, which had the problem of incompatibility. One day Mary came home from school and her mother was having a serious conversation with her friend, Julie. Mary silently went in and her mother unmindful of her presence went ahead with her conversation. She silently sat in her room and listened to her conversation.

“I was married at eighteen. He was working thousands of miles away. Our marriage was fixed all of a sudden, and so I discontinued my studies and joined him soon after the marriage. We had a wonderful life. Two years after our marriage, my daughter was born. We celebrated her first birthday on a grand scale. Time passed by so quickly and she was already on the threshold of her second birthday.” She stopped talking in an effort to hide her emotions.

“There was a doctor in our neighborhood who was always trying to flirt with me but I avoided him and never gave him a chance to take liberty with me. One day I was alone and he entered my house and started hugging and kissing me. I could not put him away as he was very strong and sturdy. He would have raped me that day but for the sudden appearance of the mailman who knocked at the door. The doctor hid himself in a room as I opened the door for the door for the mailman. I

signed and took delivery of a mail, and instead of entering into the house, I walked out of the house.”

“You should have called the neighbors.” Julie suggested.

“No. I did not. There were many neighbors who would have taken advantage of my plight and blackmailed me later. I thought that I should keep it a secret from my husband because he would be upset with the foolish doctor. I decided not to talk to the doctor again and never to open the door for him when I was alone.”

“One day I met him in the market square and pretended that I did not see him. He suddenly stood before me and started making vulgar comments. I hit him with my shoes which attracted the attention of the passers by and became the talk of the town. I had deeply hurt his feelings; and he swore in the presence of many people that he would wreak vengeance.”

“What did the people do?”

“He was a surgeon and many of them were his patients. They had a little soft corner and they did not want to make it an issue. They advised me to forget and forgive. My husband was not in town and I did not inform him when he returned.”

“One day my husband came home in an ambulance on a stretcher. I wondered what had happened to him. Two guys brought him home on the stretcher and left him in his bed. When they were gone, I asked him what went wrong. He laughed and said,

“Don’t worry. I am perfectly alright. I underwent vasectomy operation since we had resolved to have only one child,” he said, and I told him, ‘Oh God, you should have told me about it.’ He laughed loudly and said, “I wanted to surprise you.” Suddenly I asked him who the surgeon was and he said, ‘Who else could it be? It was my next door neighbor, Sid.’ I stood trembling with tongue dry and face pale.” I asked him why he went of all doctors to him. He asked what was wrong with him and declared that he was the only recognized surgeon in the town. I knew that Sid would have taken the opportunity to wreak vengeance against me. I cried like a baby and he could not understand why I was crying. Harry, are you okay? Are you sure he did not conduct a wrong operation? He said you shouldn’t suspect that gem of a person and assured that he took special care and conducted operation with great alacrity. A month elapsed and the wounds healed. One morning I found him sobbing in his room alone. I

went and asked him what went wrong. He replied after much coaxing that he had lost virility after he was operated upon. I realized what damage Sid had done. He had deliberately operated upon him to castrate him. I wept for several days but I did not tell him the incidents that happened in his absence. He thought the surgeon cut off the wrong nerve by oversight and did not attribute his impotency to the surgeon's felony. We showed him to several experts in the field but they expressed their inability repair the damage. He became impotent for no fault of his. The surgeon started pestering me to cooperate with him but I defied all his moves and told him that I would cut him to pieces. He sensed danger in my determination and quietly left the town without leaving his address to anyone. I was young with full of vigor and strength and suddenly our romantic days had ended I became almost mad. He was no less affected by this incident than he was. We have been living together for the sake of Mary otherwise we would not have lived under one roof so long. Mary was young and she did not understand our situation. Now she is fourteen and she is growing up everyday. She understands our problems and I don't know how she reacts, and how she takes her life in the backdrop of our sorrowful saga." Eliza started weeping." She finished her story and Mary heard it all."

"This arrangement has not brought happiness to anyone of you. I suggest you should quit him and live independently." Said Julie

"I have studied up to 12th grade. I can't earn handsome salary with my qualification and give Mary a better life if we are separated." Henry entered the house. He was not pleased to see Julie. She got up and took leave of Eliza.

Mary was the most depressed girl in her high school days. She used to recollect the frequent quarrels between her parents while at school and become more depressed at times. She was not concentrating on my studies, and had lost interest in sports or entertainments; and she always remained aloof. She was studying in a co-educational school and there was a boy in her class by name Barlow. He was a smart guy but nobody liked him. He was more active outside the class than inside. He started making passes at her and she was afraid of him at first, but later on, she started liking him. She used to exchange books with him as the teachers scoffed at them in dislike, and their friends made fun of them. They did not care and so, the friends stopped bothering them after sometime. There was another boy by name, Hog, who was moving closely with Barlow, but he withdrew his association with Barlow out of jealousy when she developed friendship with Barlow. Hog complained to Mary's mother that she was befriending a

bad character at school and Eliza started watching Mary closely. She followed her to school and observed her movements with Barlow and admonished her not to move with boys in general, and with that boy, in particular. But Mary never heeded to her advice and in the midst of this confrontation, she finished her high school career.

Mary was sixteen when she entered the college; and on the very first day at the college, she met Barlow who also had got admitted to the same college. Eliza could not guess whether he joined that college by choice or by chance. Anyway, the presence of Barlow roused Mary's spirits but dampened Eliza's enthusiasm as she became more apprehensive at their growing intimacy. She cautioned Mary to be careful with boys as they would lure girls and ditch them and advised her to concentrate on her studies to get good score and seek admission to medical course which was her cherished ambition. A year elapsed and Barlow attained manhood and looked very handsome. Attracted by his youth, she wished to be in his company more; and she felt more insecure day by day when many girls started vying with each other to befriend him. She felt that someone will steal his love and she will be bereft of the only love she had in all her life. She suspected the motive of every girl who talked to him and became jealous of those who attracted his attention until finally she decided to make first move to get close to him and prevent him from being charmed by coquetry of the flirting girls. He was still giving her more attention than he was giving to any other girl and she could not reconcile to the idea of losing him for the sake of her mother. One day he encountered her in the corridor and spoke to her,

“How are you doing?”

“I am fine. My father bought me a Motorbike. Would you like to have a look at it?”

“I love to have a look at it. Where have you parked your motorbike?”

“I have parked it in the front parking lot. Come on, we shall go on a jolly ride.”

He showed her his new motorbike and invited her to go for a ride

“We have Chemistry class now.” We will go for a ride in the evening.” She suggested.

“We will skip the class and go. Your mother will be waiting for you in the evening to take you home.” He reminded her.

She hesitated for a while and finally decided to go with him. They went round the city. They ate ice cream at a roadside parlor, went for lunch in a posh restaurant and then drove away to the water-park. They walked to a desolate place behind a tent where they found a boy and a girl hugging and kissing.

“Hey, look there,” he whispered.

It was the first time in her life that she saw a male and a female making love. Her hairs became straight and she imagined herself in the place of the girl over there. It was so romantic and thrilling that she did not notice when Barlow held her by her tender loin and positioned opposite to her too closely and hugged her against his broad chest. She gave in and let him do whatever he wanted and enjoyed every bit of what he did. He kissed her all over the body and when they sensed that someone was approaching, they looked around, recoiled to a respectable distance and started moving towards the crowd. That was her first and most wonderful romantic experience of her life, which she never forgot.

Mary and Barlow became more intimate as days passed by. She lost concentration of mind and her mind wandered aimlessly and pondered over sex related matters. She sheepishly followed him wherever he went and had lots of fun for a year. In the examination, she just managed to pass but he failed and dropped out of college. When he withdrew from the college, she concentrated on her studies and continued her education. Barlow had a great friend in Boucher who helped him to set up a small business for his living. She started meeting Barlow in the evenings at his business place. Many boys used to go there for spending evening hours. They were trying their best to attract her attention but she did not pay any attention to their antics in the beginning but when they started stacking her she became wild and told Barlow that she would stop coming there if his friends were not reigned in. Barlow requested her not to take on them as otherwise his business will be affected. She softened her stand and developed friendship with them. Meanwhile, Hog complained to Eliza that Mary’s friendship with Barlow had reached a dangerous point but Eliza, infuriated by his audacity, told him to mind his business and reproached him for meddling in other’s affairs.

One night Mary came home very late. Barlow dropped her off at her house by eleven. She was drunk, smelling alcohol from a distance.

“Where are you coming from?” Henry asked impatiently

“I am coming from the library,” she replied, faltering.

“What were you doing there?” he questioned, irritated.

“I was preparing for my examination,” she answered insolently

“You are drunk. Do they supply alcohol in the library?” he taunted her.

“Oh, no, I did not drink alcohol.” She answered uncaringly.

“You have drunk heavily. You are unable to walk straight. Where had you been?” He shouted.

“I had been to Barlow’s business place.”

“How dare you enter our house in the drunken state? I will kick you out of my house if you repeat again.

“I drank at Barlow’s place. What is wrong with it? Why shouldn’t I?”

“What a rogue Barlow is to supply alcohol to teenagers! Stop meeting him, okay.”

She was so sleepy that she sank into the couch and started snoring.

Eliza became all the more worried as Henry madly started yelling at her.

“You have spoiled the young mind by your loose morals.” He alleged Mary with a grimace.

“My morals are as high as anybody’s. It is you who have been drinking all your life.”

“You can certify your own moral stature but nobody else will.” He said scornfully

“Why do you blame me? I work ten hours a day. I have no time to spy on her.”

“It is mother’s responsibility to bring up children properly.”

“Look, because you quarrel with me everyday on flimsy grounds our family has become dysfunctional; and she exhibits such misdemeanors. We must stop fighting and help her to come back on the right track.”

“I promise you, Eliza, I will not confront you anymore.”

“You always keep up your promise when you are drunk.” She said derisively

“That is why I drink everyday,” he said sarcastically.

“I can leave you. I can give up anything on earth but not alcohol. That is my life. That is my wife.” She felt very sorry for him and went to her room leaving him there alone. He wept remorsefully as he was drunk heavily and dozed off after sometime.

Mary used to wander around the town with Barlow and his friends at her whims and fancies, and reach home late almost everyday. Barlow was delighted that she was helping him a great deal to improve his business by entertaining his customers. One of his billionaire friends, Boucher, started paying attention to her.

“Do you want to earn lot of money?” Boucher asked her one day.

“Sure, who would not want to earn lot of money?” She replied playfully.

“I will give you job. Would you like to work at my business place?”

“How much do I make?”

“You can make as much as you want. The job is simple. All you have to do is to welcome our customers.”

“Why do you want to pay so much for that easy job?”

“I want you. That is why.”

“I come from a respectable family.”

“I also come from a respectable family.”

“I know that. I must ask Barlow.”

“You may ask him. He will never say no. I have financed this business.”

She signaled Barlow to come over there and when he was there, she said,

“Boucher says that I should work for him at his business place. What have you got to say?”

“It is a great idea. I welcome it. If you work for me you get no money. If you work for him you get handsome pay. Barlow, how much do you propose to pay her?”

“I pay 25000 a month.”

“Really, it is a lot of money. I work for you,” she promised.

“Sometimes, you may have to go to Bombay and other places to satisfy our customers.”

“Done,” she said, not knowing what he meant. All she could think at that point of time was 25000 and nothing else, as she was dreaming of going to England to settle down there. She thanked God for having showed her the way to make money, as she was wondering where money would come from to go to England.

“I work for him between five and nine in the evening and attend to my college during daytime,” she said to herself. Next day Hog met her in the college and advised her,

“Look, Barlow and Boucher are debauchers and you end up in a red light area, stricken by deadly diseases. I am your well-wisher and warn you not to move with them.” Hog appealed to her sincerely.

“Hog, I hate you. Why don’t you mind your business and leave me alone. You are impossible.” She said in disgust and walked away.

Boucher called her to his office and asked her if she could go with him to a hotel situated outside the city overnight. She shuddered for a moment that her parents would be upset if she didn’t reach home early. She knew that his intention was not good but she also knew that if he fired her from the job, she would not reach India. So she took the bold decision of going with him to the five-star hotel. They drove to the place, which Boucher frequented at midnight, and many couples had already arrived, and many more were arriving. It was her first experience in such a joint, and she experienced something new and wonderful. The hotel was expensive and it was not affordable for middleclass people like her. It was a very big building with three floors. The music band was playing popular albums. They sat there for about half an hour. A server supplied them with a drink of rear variety which she did not know what. She asked him what kind of a drink it was and he lied to her,

“It is just a kind of cool drink with little alcohol.”

She took two glasses of that substance and the next moment she felt that she was flying in air. She thanked him repeatedly. He sat there drinking cocktail acknowledging her thanks with a sly grin. When he was done he called her to the stage where some people were dancing to the tunes.

He said, “I will teach you how to dance.”

“I love to learn dancing,” she replied.

“In England, people dance in parties,” he said. “If you want to be a part of western society you must learn to drink and dance.”

She took his advice seriously. After dancing for half an hour, he said

“Come on, we shall go to the back room,”

“Why?” she asked.

“The best is yet to be. That is what people come here for. They have to come here in couple and retire to the back rooms after dining and dancing.” He chuckled as she followed him sheepishly.

He took to her to a spacious, well-decorated room with very pleasant ambience. There was a pair of cots with thick foam beds and they had sprinkled cocktail of many scents over the beds. It looked like heaven to her little mind and gave in. He came upon her twice and she made weird sound in ecstasy. Both of them fell asleep and they might have slept there for about two hours. Suddenly, she got up and remembered that she should go back home and her parents would be searching for her by then. She asked him to wake up and take her home. They slowly walked out of the joint at two in the morning and the parking lot was empty. When they came out to the parking lot, they sat in his car, and Boucher tried to start the car but the car would not start. He made several attempts but the car failed to start. He had forgetfully left the head lights on when he parked the car in the parking lot and the battery was discharged. They walked down to the road to hire an auto but they could not get one. At last a police van stopped in front of them and a police officer alighted along with two cops and accosted them.

“Hey, what are you doing here at this hour?”

“We are waiting here to hire an auto home.”

“Where were you all this night?”

“We were at the hotel.”

“What is this man to you? Is he your husband?”

“No, we are friends.”

“How much did you earn for this night?” He ridiculed her.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what I say. You type of women comes here everyday to earn money.”

“You have mistaken me. I am not that kind of girl. We are respectable people,” she protested.

“That is what you type of women would say in defense during a police investigation, I know.”

“Believe me we are just friends.”

“A respectable woman would not come to a hotel and stay with a man up to two o’clock in the morning. We have seen hundreds of prostitutes like you in the city. We have to arrest you. Come with us to the police station.”

“Please believe me. I am not a woman of disrepute. I belong to a very respectable family.”

“We know that these days the ‘respectable’ boys bring ‘respectable’ women of respectable families to the hotels for a night stand off. But we police call it prostitution.”

“Please leave us for once. We will never do it again.”

“We can’t leave you. Your parents must know what you have been doing overnight.”

“Don’t tell our parents, as it breaks their hearts. They have no strength to withstand what you say.”

“Parents ought to know what their children do behind their back. We don’t want you to repeat it ever again.”

“Where do you live?” One of the cops asked.

“I live in Cooks town.” She answered.

“What is your phone number?”

She gave her phone number. The cop telephoned to her number. Her mother picked up the phone and asked what the matter was”

“Madam, whose number is it?”

“Why do you want to know? Who are you?”

“I am calling from Sholay police station. Your daughter is in our custody.”

“What has she done, Inspector?”

“You did not answer our question.”

“This is Henry’s house.”

“We are very sorry to disturb you but the matter is urgent. We have arrested your daughter with a guy at two in the morning. The girls of middle class families are straying into sex rockets these days and the

parents would not know what they have been doing. We expect you and your husband to come to the police station within an hour or else we will file charge sheet and produced them in the court this morning.”

“Inspector, please don’t charge her. We will take care of her. Please let her go this time. Our family will be exposed to infamy. Forgive her, please.”

“We called you to save your honor. Please bring ten bills of hundred-a thousand Rupees with you.”

“Okay inspector. We will be there in an hour.”

The inspector hung up and told the girl to relax for half an hour. Boucher was happy that the police was not pestering him.

“Inspector, My name is Boucher,” he said in a friendly tone.

“We know you are the only son of the business tycoon, Michael, and your name is Boucher. Your father has already spoken to us. He has sent 5000 Rupees fifteen minutes ago,” The inspector acknowledged gracefully.

In another half an hour, Eliza and Henry entered the police station. The inspector took an undertaking from them orally and collected 1000 for showing favor and let them go. When they were gone, he turned to Boucher and said,

“You may go now, but be careful.”

Eliza and Henry brought Mary home and as soon as they entered the house, Eliza picked up a stick and started beating Mary. There were marks of injury all over her body by morning. Eliza hysterically wailed that her daughter had spoiled family’s reputation. Three days later, Mary started going to work again and her relationship with Boucher and Barlow continued unabated for another three months.

Meanwhile, she passed her degree in Medicine and became a Physician She applied for and got enough bank loans to reach England. She was very pleased that she would settle down in there. While studying in England she became acquainted with another guy by name Lucas who started courting her. He loved her so much that at last, she made up my mind to marry him.

“Mary, I have brought some flowers for you.” He gave her a bouquet of flowers one morning. She took it and placed it on her table.”

“Mary, I want to say something but I don’t know how.”

“Say whatever you want to say.” She said, encouraging him.

“I love you and I want to marry you if you accept my hands,” he said holding her hands.

“I love you too.” She embraced him.

“I am going to India this summer. If you permit me I will meet your parents there.”

“You may meet my parents. They will be glad to receive you.”

“I want to introduce my parents to them.” He said uncannily.

“Why do you want to do that? You are inviting trouble. We will marry here without informing them. We can break the news at an appropriate time.” She suggested.

“You know, we are very traditional. My parents would want to meet your parents to seek their consent.”

“You are right. We will go to India this summer. You bring your parents home and introduce them to my parents. We will get married there and come back together. We will earn handsomely and build our own home. It is thrilling to imagine. isn’t it?”

“Yes, Mary, I have been dreaming of our marriage, home and family for the last twelve months but I dared not asking you. At last I gathered courage because we will be separated soon and we will not get a chance to propose to each other.”

That summer both of them went back to India. As soon as she landed, she informed Lucas on phone that she had arrived, and that he could bring his parents next Friday. Three days later on a Thursday morning she went to the hospital for a routine medical check up as she was feeling weak and tired for the last several months, which she attributed to lack of good food and adequate sleep. The doctor examined her and asked her to undergo blood test.

“Is it necessary to undergo blood test?” she asked, a little surprised

“You say you are going to get married in a few weeks.”

“Yes, Doctor”

“It is advisable that you should make sure that you are fully fit for the marriage.”

“Yes, Doctor, I agree with you.”

The Doctor collected her blood sample in a test-tube and asked her to come back the same evening. When she went to the doctor in the evening to collect blood report, the doctor looked at her furtively and gave her the report.

“Is everything okay, Doctor,” she asked, opening the papers.

“I am sorry, something is seriously wrong,” said the doctor looked at her intently.

“What is wrong? I am fine. I have no serious complaints.”

“But, you have tested positive to HIV and AIDS.”

“There must be some mistake, Doctor.” Now her hand was shaking and her voice was feeble.

“We have repeated the test twice to make sure the results are accurate.”

“O God, Why did it happen to me?” she said and sank into the chair, and her body began to shake.

“You have this problem for quite a long time. It is in advanced stage.” The doctor appraised her and went away leaving her to herself.

Mary wept for an hour and consoled herself. She cursed Boucher and Barlow, and her own fate. She left the hospital with a determination to face the world.

Next day her suitor, Lucas was to bring his parents home. She was bewildered and later decided to reject the marriage proposal. She left home without informing anybody leaving a letter to Eliza on the table. Next day at four in the evening, Lucas arrived with his parents but she was not home. Eliza greeted them with a shake hand and they settled down on a couch.

“My name is Lucas. Meet my parents Alfred and Allen.”

“My name is Eliza and this is my husband, Henry.”

“I don’t see your daughter. Is she not home?”

“She left this morning and has not returned home since. She knew you were coming and told us to wait for you. It is really strange that she has not returned. She may be on her way. Please sit down.”

“Our son is very much pleased with your daughter. We have not met her but Lucas has been telling us so much about her. He wants to marry

her and we have no objection. He brought us here to introduce you, Henry and Mary.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you and Mr. and Mrs. Alfred. She has told us so much about you. We have no objection to this marriage. We are immensely pleased that Lucas has found a good match in her.”

“Will you telephone her and inform that we are waiting for her. We are in a hurry because we have to leave for Delhi tonight. We can’t wait for more than an hour.”

“We understand your plight. We are so sorry. She must have been held up somewhere. She has turned off her cell phone. By the way, when is Lucas getting back to London?”

“He is here on a month’s vacation. He has finished his Doctorate and he is going back to seek employment.”

“We have heard he is well motivated, fine gentleman.” Eliza eulogized him but there was so much of anxiety in her that her face was turning crimson, and she was feeling uneasy for her daughter’s unexplained absence. She went in and brought tea. They were talking for half an hour about their family and tradition. By their talk it was certain than there was no glitch of any kind for their marriage. But Lucas became more and more apprehensive as time passed by. He was looking towards the door every minute. Eliza was even more anxious and she started faltering in her talk. Henry resigned himself to his fate and like statue dumbfound. Nobody could sense any reason for Mary’s absence. One more hour passed by, and now Lucas was peevish with his face turning red and made no attempt to conceal his growing impatience. He stood up and asked his parents to get ready to go. They stood up and sought Eliza’s permission to leave. She stood silently unable to give them any kind of explanation. They all left frustrated at her willful absence. When they were out of the house, his mother said,

“Look, if you had married her, it would have been the greatest mistake of your life. She has no interest in marrying you. That is why she deliberately hid herself from us and did not show up.”

“She is not the kind of girl you are trying to make out of her. She is very daring and not sly as you imagine. Something serious must have happened to her or else she would be staying home today.”

“She is not the right kind of partner for you. We don’t agree to this marriage. Forget her.”

They went away that night by air to Delhi. Eliza sat there dumbfounded not knowing what to do and Henry, like a statue for nearly two hours. Then her mother went to see if Mary had left any note in her room and found a letter on her table. Mary had addressed the letter to her mother.

“My dear mother, I considered Lucas’s proposal seriously and I have decided to remain unmarried till the end of my life. I am sorry I gave false hope to Lucas. Not knowing how to withdraw from my commitment, I left the house and placed you in an embarrassing situation. He will never come back to me, I know, but it is good to all of us. I will come home late tonight. Don’t wait for me for dinner. Bye.”

Eliza talked to her on her cell phone. Mary was in an inebriated condition and talked incoherently.

“Mom, forget Lucas. He is history. I am having great fun with Barlow.”

When she kept the phone down, Eliza exclaimed, “This is really strange. She called her suitor home and went away to meet her former friend, Barlow. She has always been wayward and I don’t know where this waywardness will lead her ultimately.”

“Forget her. She never listened to us. She is destined to suffer.”

Mary came back home at midnight as Barlow waited for her in his car at the gate, and she left home after collecting some of her belongings as Henry looked on and Eliza pleaded with her to stay back. They did not hear about her until long afterwards when they abruptly bumped into Hog on the pavement.

“Hog, stop, I want to speak to you.” She begged him as he tried to avoid her. He stopped until she caught up with him.

“Hog, tell me the truth. Where is Mary now?”

“How do I know where Mary is? I always mind my business.” He started to leave.

“Stop, you always pried on her. You know the truth. Come out with the truth, for heaven’s sake, please.”

“She is in her deathbed, fighting for life.”

“What happened to my daughter? She was quite healthy when she left home.”

“Come with me. I will take you to her. She lives in a lane nearby.” He took her there. It was a one room dingy place in a slum with no amenities.

“Mary, what happened to you? Why are you bedridden at this young age?”

“I abused my youth, and played with it at the cost of my life. Mom, I am dying. I was longing to meet you before death and I am so glad that you are here. Who brought you Here, Mom?”

“Hog”

“Thank you so much, Hog. You are such a wonderful man. I was so blind to your goodness. Mom, Hog pays rent for this place. He has been paying for this facility. He has spent all his earnings for providing comfort to me in the last days of my life. He is my Godfather.”

“Hog, I thank you. I shall be very grateful to you if you can call my husband here?”

“Of course, I can.” He went out, made a call to Henry and returned. Henry reached the place within an hour, but he was too late to see his daughter alive. She died on the lap of her mother.

THE END

Story Five

A shortcut to America

Young, energetic, twenty-four years old, Sony was one of those women who aspired to reach America after her post graduate studies for a cozy and comfortable living. She had finished her Master's degree with distinction and waited for a day when a fine bread gentleman will descend from Air India and beg her to marry her because she knew that she was stunningly attractive, and men paid her extra attention. Manhar, her father, who had just retired from government service with a pension of 5000 Rupees a month, expected her to earn some money for her marriage expenses, as his retirement fund will be eroded within no time if he used that money for her marriage. He was worried because she was not getting a good job but she was worried that her suitor had not yet arrived in India.

Sony and her father were sitting quietly on a couch deeply immersed in their thoughts when her friend Monica disturbed them by repeated knockings at the door. Sony opened the door and invited her in. She sat opposite to Manhar and spoke to him.

“Uncle, I have brought very good news.” She said gleefully

“What is it, Monica?” Manhar asked getting up from his reverie.

“My brother Manas has returned home on three weeks' vacation from Ethiopia. He is teaching Mathematics there in a college for undergraduate students. He wants to propose to Sony if you have no objection. He is pestering me to talk to you on this matter.”

“It is good to know that your brother is interested in marrying Sony. We know him from his boyhood and he is a nice guy. We appreciate his initiative. We will call on your parents to formally propose. We will bring Sony too. Will your brother be home this evening?”

“Papa, don't give her any assurance. I don't like to marry him.” Sony opposed, upset by his assurance to Monica.

“Why are you upset, Sony? He is a well settled young man, earning handsome salary.” Manhar asked in surprise.

“I wish to marry a man settled in America. I wait for the day when someone from America proposes to marry me.”

Monica stood up disappointed and started to leave as Manhar shrugged his shoulders in discomfiture and Sony silently sat watching his reaction.

Next morning, Sony sat waiting for the mail to arrive as she was expecting a good offer of employment from a multinational company.

“Post,” called the mailman at the door. Manhar looked on with interest as she collected the mail and opened it. Her face became radiant when she had finished reading the letter.

“Papa I got a job. I have to meet the President of the company tomorrow with all my credentials.”

“Good! What kind of a job is it?”

“It is software engineer’s position. I will be making 400,000 a year.”

“Great Sony, Your dream has come true. You can use this experience here as a stepping-stone for your success in America.”

“Papa, that is true. I always wanted to work for a multinational software company.”

“Puja, see, your daughter got a good job. God heard your prayer,” said Manhar in great exuberance.

Puja hugged her daughter in great excitement. The rest of the day they spent talking about the changing fortune in their lifetime.

“Puja, you make 400,000 a year. In ten years, you will save 4,000,000 rupees. Every woman must strive for financial stability, if she is to be respected by her husband and parents-in-law. If she depends on her husband for her needs, she will soon be despised her husband. You know how these men deal with their wives if they don’t bring fortune.”

“Mummy, what are you talking? Do you mean to say that every man expects fortune from his wife?”

“Yes, Sony, it is harsh but true. A few years after the marriage, a man’s affinity to his wife will be directly proportional to the quantum of fortune she brings into the family. That is the way these men are. If the wife doesn’t bring wealth, some people openly jeer at them, some start

intimidating, some openly insult and some even start assaulting their wife.”

“It is really amazing the way you are espousing the cause of women.”

“You don’t know Sony what we have gone through in our life time. Listen. When I was married I was studying in eighth grade and I was thirteen then. Your father was sixteen year old. He came to our house with his elder brother at the invitation of my father with a view to see and approve me for marriage. Your father was sitting his head hung down without even looking at me. I was so shy that I did not look at him but for once. Not even our eyes met.

“This is my brother, Manhar. He has passed his matriculation and he has joined the government college for 12th grade. Our father died when he was six and I have looked after him for ten long years. I cannot support him with my meager income. If you offer your daughter in marriage he should be very lucky because he gets your support for his education. It will be your responsibility to educate him and settle him in life.”

“I am a millionaire. Don’t worry. Let him study as much as he wants. We are ready to bear all his expenses.”

The marriage was over; and he started living with me in my parents’ house. Both of us were so young that we did not know what marriage meant. Two years passed and you were born. Your father was still in second semester of his degree course when the news came that my father died of cholera in the village. Thousands of people were dying in those days, of famine, pestilence and epidemics like cholera, plague and small pox every year. He died at a young age of 45. My brother was just 20. He was also studying in the last semester of the degree and he had to discontinue his studies for he had to manage 200 acres of paddy fields, scattered in different villages. One day your father went to ask my brother if he would pay the fees for college admission. He said,

“I have 200 acres of land to look after. I need an assistant. You give up your studies and work for me.”

“Your father had promised to pay my fees until I completed my studies.”

“I have so many litigations to fight. I can’t help you.”

“I can’t waste my time, managing your property. I am sorry. What do I get in return?”

“You will get food and shelter for your services.”

“I need a career job which will get me salary, promotion and prosperity.”

“You can search for a job but you don’t get one. If you reject my offer now, my doors will be closed to you for ever.”

“I don’t mind getting out of your house. I work somewhere and earn my living.”

“In that case, I expect you to leave my house with your wife and child. We don’t keep them here.”

Your father had no place to go. He left us at my brother’s place against his will and went away. We did not know about his whereabouts. Six months later he came home to meet me when my brother was not home.”

“Where were you all these days and what were you doing?”

“I went to live with my brother. He asked me to leave his house three days ago.”

“Why did he ask you to leave abruptly?”

“There was a nurse living next door. She had a sixteen years old daughter by name Clara. We were meeting each other at the compound, finding it hard to spend our time. We talked hours together, and that attracted the attention of our neighbors who brought it to the notice of my elder brother who immediately asked me to leave the village, sensing trouble. I had no place to go. God is great. When I was about to leave the house, mail arrived and I received a letter of appointment. I was appointed as a teacher in a Middle school. I hired a house for rent and come to take you home. Our worst days are over. I hope everything will be all right hereafter.”

“I have been praying God to show mercy on us and the God has heard me.” I told him, hugging. He wept like a child in my arms.

“God saved us from hunger and starvation, and more than all, from humiliation.” He said consoling himself.

“He appeared privately for his degree examination and got his Bachelor’s degree years later.” Puja said, wiping her tears. Puja continued,

“He developed hatred towards our family and gradually started hating me too. Though I was no way responsible to what happened to his career, he started beating me up and ill-treated me. Since I was not well educated, there was no possibility of my getting a respectable job, I stayed with him and suffered all through my life. He passed his Bachelor’s Degree ten years later but still he nurtured hatred towards me and my family. I used to pray god not to create such a situation to my daughter. I wanted you to study well and become self reliant and self sufficient I am really very glad that you have become fit to be on your own, earning a handsome remuneration.” Puja narrated her tale of woe and misery.

Next morning Sony dressed herself up neatly and went to work saying that she would be back by five in the evening. Puja called many of her relatives on phone and informed them that Sony got a good employment. At one in the afternoon, there was a knock at the door. Puja reached the door in a hurry to see who the caller was. Puja was astonished to see Sony back so early. Sony was looking pale.

“Why did you return so early? Didn’t you get the job?”

Sony started crying loudly. She was feeling so sorry to disappoint her parents.

“What happened, Sony?”

“Mom, I am sorry to disappoint you. I will not be able to take up this employment.”

“Why?”

“The President called me to his chamber and said, ‘if you want to work here you have to make compromises with me. You must learn to give and take here.’”

“I give my labor, not my honor. Do you get it, I retorted.”

“In that case, I advise you to seek employment elsewhere.” He said and left his chamber leaving me alone there. I walked out. I am sorry Mom; I can’t work in a place where there is harassment. I don’t know what Papa feels about this.”

“Don’t worry. Don’t tell Papa about your encounter with that President. He will not let you to take up employment anywhere else. Okay?”

“I know Mom, I know.”

Half an hour later her father returned home.

“Sony has decided not to work for that company. She came back without taking up the job.” Puja said, unsure of what course the conversation might take.”

“Very good, it is the best that could happen to us.” Manhar said with a sigh of relief.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“I will tell you something that surprises you.”

“What is it?”

“Someone from America is coming to see Sony this evening. Ask her to get ready to meet him.”

“Who is coming to see her? Why do they want to see her?”

“Sometimes you embarrass me too much by your childish talk. You are a mother of a twenty-four years old daughter, and you should know why anybody would come to see a young woman. His name is Naresh and he is a gentleman in his late twenties. He is working as a software engineer in America. A friend of mine mediated, and he has agreed to see Sony. Our Sony is very lucky if he agrees to marry her.”

“She will be the luckiest if he marries her.” Puja agreed.

“What is the matter? Whose marriage are you talking about? Sony asked when she came out of her room.

“Someone has put up a very good marriage proposal for you, Sony. Simply accept it and you will live a wonderful life.”

“I don’t understand what you are talking about? Who shall I marry? Who is proposing to me?”

“He will come to see you this evening. Don’t talk to him rudely and displease him, okay. Your zodiac signs are looking up.”

“Papa, just now you are retired. You have hardly money enough to meet your expenses. How can you spend the little money you have for my marriage and suffer for the rest of your life?”

“Don’t worry, Sony. Don’t worry about us. We have only one aim in life and that is to see you married to a well-settled man who keeps you happy. We are old and have no other aspirations in life. We can eke out our living somehow. Get ready to see your suitor.

That evening Naresh a sprucely dressed, good looking, gentleman visited Sony and her parents. His parents accompanied him. He appeared a good-looking, well-bred, fine gentle man in his early twenties. Puja and Manhar accorded them a very warm welcome and greeted them with a handshake before they settled down for talk. Manhar called Sony out and introduced the guests to her. Sony came out neatly clad in an expensive Banaras sari and with a perfectly matching blouse. She raised her head and gave a quick glance at Naresh and lowered her head as she sat down.

“How are you doing?” Naresh inquired.

“I am doing fine.” She replied. She hesitated to talk to the guests and sat silently for a while but she gradually gathered courage to tell him,

“I want to talk to you.” She spoke softly.

“Good, but not here,” he told her a little alarmed by her boldness.

“Come on, we will climb up the terrace and talk for a while. You will be pleased to see the landscape surrounding this area from the terrace.”

“I love this area. A friend of mine lives here,” said he climbing the steps as he followed her to the terrace.

“What is your name?”

“Sony”

“I like that name. I had a classmate of that name.”

“Was she just a classmate?”

“She was a little more than that. We used to sit and chat for long hours. We had a great deal of interaction in the college premises. But I never dated with her.”

“Didn’t you make any attempt to invite her for lunch or eat out?”

“I did but she refused.”

“Did you love her?”

“Yes, a sort of, I wanted to express my love to her but she gave me no chance. Whenever I drew my conversation aside from the curriculum, she would find some pretext to go away from me.”

“So you loved her and she didn’t, right?”

“Exactly, I tried several times to tell her my feelings but she brushed it aside even before I started. When we completed our degree course we were separated. I was feeling so lonely that six months later, I went in search of her house and knocked at her door. Her father opened the door. I asked him if she was there. But he said that she went to America. I asked if she went for higher studies but he said to my utter disappointment that she got married and settled down in Chicago.”

“Is there any other woman in your life?”

“No. There is no woman in my life, I assure you.”

“I don’t trust men.”

“Were you jilted by any man at any point of time in your life?”

“No. I am very shrewd. I never gave a chance to anyone to deceive me.” She raised her head like proud peacock.

“I must be very lucky to marry a girl like you.” He uttered to elevate her pride further.

“I shall be really lucky to marry an honest and upright man like you. You are such a well-accomplished guy. I am told you are a software engineer in America.”

“I have worked for some international companies.” He announced proudly.

“Where do you live at present?”

“I am living in Pittsburg at the university heights.”

“How many of you are living together?”

“We are two, I and my assistant. My assistant keeps the house neat and clean, and I work for a multinational company.”

“I need to talk to any one of your friends or relatives who knows you?”

“I don’t have their address or phone number right now. Won’t you trust me?”

“I have heard that lots of people these days come back to India on vacation, marry here, and go back to America without leaving proper address. They will forget their wives conveniently.”

“I have also heard of such incidents. It is more cooked up than real. These women have no patience. They raise hue and cry if there is little delay in reaching America. You cannot reach America until you get visa. There are certain procedures to be followed, and there may be some delay.”

“May be, I don’t know. I don’t have any close relative or friend in America. I believe you.”

“Thanks for the trust you have reposed in me.”

“Do you want to ask me any question?”

“Not really. I know you are a well accomplished educated girl.”

“When will you be returning to America?”

“I am on three weeks vacation. I want to get married within a week’s time.”

“I have no objection to marrying you. Our elders fix the date of marriage after astrological consultations.”

“You are really very lovable. Shall we go in and join others?”

“Of course, we shall.”

They entered the house and sat on the couch as all eyes were fixed on them inquisitively. Sony’s mother called her in and asked,

“Do you like this boy?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you marry him?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Does the boy like you?”

“Yes, he does.”

“Shall we go ahead and propose you to him?”

“Sure, you can.” Both of them came out in a jubilant mood. Puja’s face became radiant. She called her husband aside for a while and informed him that Naresh and Sony had agreed to marry each other. She asked him to formally propose their marriage. They joined the guests.

“Our daughter has agreed to marry your son.” Manhar announced

Naresh’s mother turned to Naresh and asked him,

“Do you agree to marry Sony, my son?”

“Yes. I shall marry her.”

“Now, Sony, do you marry Naresh?”

“Of course, I will.”

The rest was a formality. The date of marriage was fixed.

“We have only a week’s time left. It is very difficult to arrange a marriage within a week. We have to get a party hall. You know this is marriage season and it is very difficult to find a suitable place for marriage.”

“We understand your situation. We don’t insist upon a grand marriage. We accept only 500,000 rupees in dowry. It is very nominal. Our son earns 200,000 dollars a year in America.”

“We have only 200,000 left with us in our retirement fund. If we spend that money away, we will have nothing left.”

“The choice is yours. We have people who are ready to pay 1,000,000. We are not asking for gold and silver. We are not asking for Car or house. We are asking just 500,000.”

“We need time till tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow we are leaving for Delhi. There is a colonel who has a beautiful daughter. We will fly tomorrow morning and meet her in the evening.”

“Please give us six hours time. We will try to find out if it is possible to arrange such a huge amount of money in such a short period of time.”

“Okay, we wait for your call up to ten in the night.” They started to leave. Manhar had arranged a taxi for dropping them off. They sat in the taxi and waved at Manhar and Puja. The boy waved coldly at Sony.

When they were gone, Sony rushed into her house leaving the parents behind. They followed her and when they were in the house, Sony announced,

“Mama, I don’t marry this man. How dare he ask for dowry! I don’t marry a greedy man like him.”

“Don’t take any decision in haste. He earns 200,000 in a year. To him it is not a lot of money.”

“If he earns so much, where is the need to demand dowry from us?”

“They say he has a sister to be married who has disability. So they are collecting money to pay for her dowry.” Manhar said patiently.

“This is not a charity home. We can’t pay for her marriage. Call them at once and inform them that you have called off the marriage.” She said decisively.

“Why do you worry, my child? It is our problem. We want to see you married off to a well-accomplished fine gentleman, well settled in America. We are very lucky that we have got such a nice man. We can’t lose him so easily.”

“I know your situation, Papa. You are left with just 200000. If you lose it, you will have to beg in streets. I don’t want to reach America by walking over your pride and honor.”

“Your father still has some energy left to work and earn his daily bread. Don’t bother about us. We are not parting with the retirement fund either. We are selling this house to raise money. Okay?”

“No Papa, it is not okay. You cannot buy a house again. You can never buy a house again in your lifetime. You may have to live in slum amidst poorest of the poor. I will never agree to this marriage.

“Keep quiet and listen to what we say. I telephone to my brother, Hari. If he agrees to buy this house for 500,000, we will celebrate your marriage. Otherwise we drop proposal.” Puja said decisively and sank into a chair, as Manhar and Sony watched her plight mutely.

“Papa, I assure you that I earn lot of money in America and pay back the amount you are going to spend on my marriage. If possible, I send some money every month towards your expenses. You must not refuse.”

The telephone rang and Sony lifted the phone.

“Hi, is it Sony?”

“Yes, speaking.”

“I am Naresh. We just now reached home. I really love you, Sony. I don’t know how I can live without you for another week. You have clean bowled me on your cricket ground. I lose and you win.”

“No Naresh. This marriage is not possible. Your parents are asking for 500,000 in dowry, and we don’t have that much to pay. This marriage has to be called off. I am sorry. You can marry whoever pays you dowry and be happy.” She hung up. Naresh rang up again. Sony asked impatiently,

“What is it, now?”

“Oh my dear, you’re very emotional. Why do you worry about these problems? It is between our parents to sort it out. I cannot live without seeing you for a minute. Will you meet me tomorrow at Blue Moon? We will go for a movie and saunter around the Brigade Road. Is it okay with you?”

“I am not so sure.”

“Don’t worry I will pick you up from your house. Tell your parents that I am coming to take you around.”

Sony was puzzled and kept the phone down.

“What did he say?”

“He says he will come tomorrow evening to pick me up. He asked me if I could go to a movie with him.” Sony announced.

“The guy appears to be very good. We must be lucky to get such a good son-in-law. He is already in love with her. I am sure he will not cancel this marriage.” Manhar said in ecstasy.

“His parents will not agree to this marriage unless we pay 500,000.” Sony reminded them.

“I will call my brother over the phone. Everything depends on him. If he agrees to pay 500000 for this house, the marriage is on, otherwise the marriage is off,” said her mother decisively, and called her brother on phone.

“Hi, how are you doing, Puja?” He enquired.

“I am fine, Ramu.”

“I am in a hurry. I have to go for jogging. Shall I give phone to your sister-in-law? She has all the time in this world for gossip.”

“Hang on Ramu; I am not calling for chitchat. I know you are always busy about nothing. I have something important to tell you. Please listen. I am in a great dilemma.”

“Okay, tell me what you want to say.”

“A boy from America is interested in marrying Sony.”

“That is great news. It is very good to know. When are you planning to celebrate their marriage?”

“They want us to celebrate the marriage within seven days.”

“Do you want any help?”

“Yes, we need your help. That is why I called you.”

“I will send my wife to your house three days in advance. She will be of great help to you.”

“Thank you. But we need more than that. We need to raise 600,000 for her marriage in three days.”

“That is impossible. Why do you need that lot of money? American guys do not like wasting lot of money on marriage expenses. They generally prefer simple marriage.”

“He is very sensible. His parents are greedy. They want 500,000 in dowry.”

“Call off that marriage immediately. He is not your choice. A well bred gentleman will never demand dowry.”

“That is what you think. I have never come across any person who has married without dowry in this part of the country.”

“But where will you bring that money from?”

“I don’t know. That is why I rang up. I thought you would buy our house and arrange for 600,000 immediately.”

“That is a very difficult proposition, sister. If I had money I would have given you. I don’t know if I can help you in this matter.”

“Brother, it is a trying situation for us. I have never asked you for your help in all my life. Moreover, I have not asked you for my share in my father’s property. You are enjoying the entire property of our father alone. You should not disappoint me now. I am not asking you for loan. I want you to purchase my house. She is twenty-four and she must settle down in life.”

“But where will you live if you sell that house?”

“Give us fifteen days time. We will shift to a rented house. Let the marriage be over.”

“I have no problem but you know Sukanya’s nature. She won’t agree to part with that lot of money for nothing. She requires the possession of the house immediately. I will send money with Sukannya day after tomorrow. You hand over the keys of the house. You must make

an alternative arrangement for your living. Consult your husband and call back.”

“No, I don’t consult anyone, not even my husband. My words are final. I will find a rented house by tomorrow evening. Shall I give my words to the boy’s parents? Are you sure you will pay the amount by day after tomorrow?”

“You can count on me. After all we are brother and sister.

“Thank you, brother, I shall be ever grateful to you.”

Two days later Sukannya carried a draft for 600,000 to Manhar. The boy’s parents were waiting there for her arrival. They condescended to wait as long as Puja wanted, and collected the draft, after Manhar endorsed it in their name. Sukannya and Puja went in search of a party hall. Luckily for them, they found a party hall to their satisfaction.

“Now that you have found a Party Hall shall we search for a vacant house?” Sukannya asked.

“Sukannya, bear with us. We don’t cheat you. Please wait till the marriage is over. We will vacate within a week.”

“You have to move to your rented house giving us the vacant possession of your house immediately. Your brother has told you over the phone.”

“I am not denying it. I beg you to take mercy on us. You shall not belittle us in the eye of Naresh and his people.”

“As you please but remember we will not let you live there after the bridegroom leaves your house.”

“Thank you, Sukannya. We will do as you say. We have already talked to a friend of mine, and she has kept a vacant house ready for occupation.”

Puja’s brother was already home waiting for them when they reached home. Next two days were spent in arranging for the marriage. The nuptial knot was tied and the marriage went on well.

Next morning, Sony’s friends came to meet her. They had all praise for Naresh, his manners and demeanors. They told her that she was the luckiest and sought her assurance that she would write to them as soon as

she reached America, and she promised that she would. They all parted wishing her well. That night Naresh was worried.

“You seem to be worried. What is bothering you?” Sony asked him

“Sony, I wish I could take you with me. These days they are rejecting visas. I think you should wait until I get back to America and send all the required documents for your visa.”

“You should have told me before marriage if there was any visa problem. You promised to take me to America immediately after marriage, and now you have changed your tune. I must go with you.”

“Of course, no girl wants to be left behind by her husband after marriage.”

“We will apply for visa and try our luck, okay,” she suggested.

Three days later they applied to American consulate and obtained visa.

“I am very lucky that I got spouse visa.” She told him exuberantly.

“You got spouse visa but that does not mean you are lucky.” He said crossly.

“What do you mean?” She asked with a bit of surprise in her voice.

“Nothing, I was just pulling your legs.”

“Okay, we will go to a travel agent to book tickets.”

“I have a return ticket. I advise you to buy round ticket.”

“Why should I buy a round ticket? I am not returning to India for at least two years.”

“Otherwise they don’t let you enter America. Honey who knows what is in store for you! God knows!”

“Today you are talking enigmatically. It is so surprising.”

“Sony, you may have many surprises in store which will unfold in the coming days”. Sony looked at him in askance but his expressionless face did not reveal anything. She felt little uncomfortable but she did not mind it in her exuberance of traveling across the seven seas.

On the day of departure, Manhar and Puja, along with their friends and relatives were at the airport to see her off. When the plane zoomed

over the sky, they returned home in a melancholic mood, overwhelmed by Puja's departure with Naresh

Sheela was a good friend of Sony. She and her parents knew what kind of hardship they were going through. Sony had sought their help before leaving for America, and they had promised that they would provide accommodation for Puja and Manhar until they made an alternative arrangement. When Sony left India Manhar and Puja went to stay with Sheela, vacating their house. Ramu and Sukannya locked the house and left. "How much did we make in this deal?" asked Sukannya during the course of their journey.

"Not much, we have made a profit of three hundred thousand grand."

Manhar and Puja moved their goods to a small rented house that can be hardly called a house after a week's stay with Sheela and her parents. They had now an income of three thousand a month and 1500 would go for rent. It was a hand to mouth living but they were still happy at times as they believed that their daughter was in safe hands.

The plane touched down Hopkins airport thirty-six hour later and Sony walked out of the airport in high spirits ensconced by the fresh air of America. Everything was strange but great. She was glad to be a part of the new world. When they came out of the airport, Naresh was looking for a car. There was anxiety writ large on his face. His hands were shaking and he was muttering something that Sony could not hear.

"Are we hiring a Taxi? She asked enthusiastically.

"I am waiting for someone to pick us up."

"Are you expecting a friend of yours?"

"No. I am expecting a taxi to arrive."

"Does he know that you are arriving by this plane?" Before he could answer a car pulled up on the kerb, and the lady behind the wheels called, 'hi, Naresh'. A young lady of her age got out of the car and beamed a broad smile to Naresh. Naresh went and hugged her.

"Honey, I am pleased to see you back." She said and looked into the face of Sony and asked him,

"Who is this?"

"I told you that I would bring a helper from India. Meet Sony. She will help you in the upkeep of our house."

“What are you talking?” Sony asked impatiently as the young lady looked on with great discomfiture.

“Keep quiet Sony. I will explain to you later.” He admonished her.

She stood flabbergasted for a minute, and composed herself, as she had no courage to confront Naresh.

Both ladies were quiet until they reached home after traveling for an hour.

“Where shall I keep her luggage?” The lady assistant asked.

“Place it in her room.” He said casually. Turning to Sony, he said,

“Sony, come on, I will show you your room.” He took her to a room on the upstairs.

“What is this, Naresh? Who is she? What do you mean by saying ‘your room’? We are husband and wife. We must have a common room. Your room is my room.”

“I told you that she is our servant. But don’t order her. She will not take it. Talk to her with respect until she becomes familiar with you. Now you must be tired. Go to bed. I have something important to discuss with her.

“What have you got to discuss with her?”

“I was not in the house for the last one month. I must ask for accounts. Go to bed. Sweet dreams. I will be with you in an hour. He went out closing the door behind him. Sony got apprehensive that something was terribly wrong with that guy, but she was very sleepy. She soon fell asleep and did not get up for twelve hours.”

Next noon she got up and looked out of the window. The taxi was still standing in front of the house and Naresh was behind the wheel. She was wondering why he was driving a taxi. She came out of her room and barged to his assistant’s room to ask her, why Naresh was driving a taxi.

His assistant opened her eyes widely and asked,

“Why are you entering my room like this without knocking at my door? Don’t you have manners?”

“I don’t understand what is happening here.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Where did Naresh go?”

“There is no one of that name in this house.”

“I mean the man with whom I came here last night.”

“Oh, you don’t even know his name. He is David.”

“David? He told me that his name was Naresh”

“No, his name is David.”

“Why did he drive away in a taxi?”

“He is the owner of that Taxi. He makes his living by driving Taxi.”

“He told me that he was a software engineer working for an international company.”

“David is a software engineer! That can’t be. You must be kidding. He was never a software engineer. He drives taxi from airport to downtown and downtown to airport, and sometimes he drives long distances.”

“What is your name?”

“I am Dana.”

“Where do you stay?”

“Here, in this house, with David.”

“What is David to you?”

“He is my boyfriend. I have been living with him for nearly two years. Why are you asking me these questions? Who are you?” The lady assistant asked Sony in great astonishment.

“I was married to this man eight days ago in India. He told me that his name was Naresh and married me. He told me that there was a housekeeper in the house to do the household chores. I thought it was a man. He didn’t tell me it was a woman.”

“I came to this house as a house-keeper. I was sweeping and cleaning the house for two days in a week. One day he started asking me if I loved him. He vouched that he loved me. I told him that my husband had not divorced me yet and I couldn’t marry him. He said that was okay, and proposed that we would remain friends until I was divorced, and marry when I legally got divorce from my husband. Since then I have been living with him.”

“Did he tell you that he was going to marry someone in India?”

“No. Three days ago he telephoned me and said that he was bringing a house-keeper from India and that she would do all the house chores for me.”

“Now that you know that he has married me, what do you do?”

“I don’t know I have no other place to go. I thought you were the house-keeper from India.”

“Let him come home. I will show him what I am.”

Sony went back to her room, threw herself on the bed and started weeping. After a while she thought of calling him on phone. She picked up the phone and talked.

“Hi, David, it is me, Sony.”

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“You fool; you have already done enough damage for me. What more do you want to do?”

“Oh, it is my Sony. Did you sleep well?”

“How could I sleep? You cheat. You told me that you are Naresh but you turned out to be David.”

“Come on, Sony. What is in a name? What does it matter whether I am David or Naresh?”

“You fool, it may not matter to you but it does matter to me.”

“I can’t help it. It is your problem.” He kept the phone down. She repeatedly tried to contact him but he did not pick up the phone. The whole day she was starving and weeping.

In the evening she went to Dana and asked her,

“Where is my luggage?”

“It is lying in the closet.”

“Where is the closet?”

“Over there.” She showed the closet. Her luggage was opened already and things were lying scattered.

“Who opened my baggage?”

“I don’t know. This morning David was searching your baggage.”

“Where is my wallet?”

“I don’t know. David carried it saying that he was going to keep it in a safe place.”

Sony had her money and travel documents in that wallet.

“I, I need your help. Tell me where he could have taken my wallet. I have very important documents in it.” Sony asked Dana politely.

“He keeps everything in the bank vault.”

“Which Bank, you mean?”

“You must ask him.” She went away to the next room.

That night David reached home at one in the morning, unlocked the door and came in noiselessly. Sony had slept just then and she was in deep sleep.

Next morning she got up at five and searched for him. He had half closed the door of his room. Dana lay on his bed next to him. They were talking in a low but distinct voice. Sony overheard their conversation

“Did you tell her that my name is David?”

“Yes, you are David, right?”

“You are right. I am David. But I had told her that my name was Naresh.”

“Why did you lie to her?”

“I had no other option but to tell lies.”

“Why, you could have told her frankly that you are David.”

“She would not have married me.”

“Why would she refuse to marry you if your name was David?”

“She is not a Christian. She will not marry outside her community. There are no inter-religious marriages in India.”

“The other day you introduced me to a couple who belonged to two different religions- the girl’s name was Sonia, a Christian name and boy’s name was Manas, a Hindu name.”

“That was a love marriage. They married against the wishes of their parents. No parent will consent to such a marriage.”

“Then why did you marry her?”

“You know Dowry system is prevailing only among the Hindus. If I marry a Hindu, I could collect 5000 dollars. It is a side income for me. Whenever I go to India, I marry a girl and come back promising her to send visa papers. I will never go back to them and they will never be able to trace me.”

“Suppose they locate you and complain to the police?”

“I am an American citizen and Indian courts have no direct jurisdiction.”

“Suppose they inform American government.”

“They cannot locate me because I have given them false names.”

“Why do you cheat people?”

“That is the way, I make easy money. Most women in India crave to marry an Indian American because they can settle down in America.”

“So you are a cheat, and cheating is your profession.”

“I beg you. Don’t tell anyone. I need you. I need your help.”

“Promise me you would not repeat this again.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Promise that you don’t hurt her.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Promise that you will let that girl go back to India.”

“I have no objection if she goes back to India. I need you, not her.”

“Then, get up. Go to the bank, and bring her travel documents back. Apologize to her. Look after her until she takes the earliest plane to India.”

“I do as you say,”

“If you break any of these promises, I will call the police.”

“Please don’t call the police. I will do as you say.”

“Fool, she is an educated, unlike you. If she wants, she can put you in a penitentiary. Get up and get busy.”

Sony went back to her room and waited for his move. David went out in his cab and returned back in half an hour.

“Now you go back to your work. I will manage to send her back to India.” She said, collecting from him her money and papers.

When he was gone, she went into Sony’s room, gracefully gave a short and sweet smile to Sony and said,

“Sony, Here are your travel documents, your return ticket and money for your travel expenses.”

“Thank you, Dana.”

“What will you do now?”

“I will take the earliest plane to India.”

“Don’t you stay back and fight for your rights.”

“I lost something that I cannot retrieve.””

“What is it?”

“I lost my virginity.”

“What does that matter?”

“In India, very few people come forward to marry a divorced woman. I will never be able to marry a kind of man I would like to marry in my lifetime. Anyway, thanks a lot. You have really saved me from this fool.”

“If you want to stay here, you can.”

“He is a cheat and uncouth. I don’t want to live with him. He will certainly go to jail, if not today some other day. I have reason to believe that he has cheated many women and has shattered the hopes of many aspiring young women. I will not live with him even for a moment. Will you call a travel agent and fix up my travel date, the earliest one?”

Dana contacted a travel agent and fixed her travel back to India by the earliest plane. She told David on the phone not to show up until she leaves. A week later Dana dropped off Sony at the airport. In the next 36 hours, Sony reached Bangalore airport. Her face was swollen by constantly weeping all the way. When she came out of airport, she called home and informed her father that she had come back.

“Papa I have come back to India. I am at the Bangalore airport. Can you pick me up immediately?” She spoke in a muffled voice.

“Sony, my dear, what happened? Has something gone wrong?”

“Papa, everything went wrong. Please come to the airport immediately. I am waiting for you.”

“Sony, I will be there in an hour. Wait for me.” He hung up and hurriedly started dressing up.

“Whose phone was it?” Puja asked him

“It was an urgent call. I will be back in half an hour. Wait for me. I have no time to talk to you. Okay? Don’t feel anxious. Take it easy.”

“I have prepared special lunch for you to celebrate our daughter’s marriage and I have arranged special Puja at Krishna temple at eleven, as Lord Krishna bestowed on her a great husband and wonderful life”

“Puja, Puja, how can I explain to you my anguish? Cancel all engagements. There is no God. There is no God. The earth is full of demons and devils.” Puja stood as if struck by a bolt from the blue.

He left home in a hurry cursing the God. He hired an auto and reached airport forty-five minutes later.

An hour later Sony reached home and knocked at the door. Puja opened the door, saw Sony back home and fainted.

When Sony left for India, Dana went back home and called David on phone to tell him that Sony had left for India.

“I thank you, Dana. You saved me. If that woman had gone to the police, I would have been in deep trouble. I love you. I know you love me too. We will marry as early as we can and live together forever. I will never cheat you again. I promise you.”

“Come home immediately. I don’t like to talk on phone. I am waiting for you.”

“Okay, I will be there in an hour. We will go on a long tour.” He said as he hung up. He was very relaxed and felt happy that Dana handled the situation so adroitly. When he was home he found some baggage ready for transportation at the main door.

“Honey, Is it Sony’s baggage? You said, she already left for India but her baggage is still lying here.”

“That is my baggage.”

“Oh, you are ready with your baggage for a long tour.”

“No, I am ready to leave you. You cheated me. Thank God, I didn’t call the police.”

She placed her luggage in the trunk of her car and drove away without bidding good-bye. Naresh laughed sardonically and said to himself,

“I shot two birds with a single arrow. I shall search for my next prey.”

THE END

Story Six

By God's Grace

Jay drove twenty miles to reach office from his home everyday. It was a mid winter evening and he was driving with great difficulty as there was blizzard all along the road. He had left his children in school early in the morning, and he had to pick them up before school closed for the day. He slogged his way back home through the blistering wind, and he was lucky to reach the school premises without any untoward event on the way. He picked up Daniel but Monica was not around.

“Will you call Monica? We must reach home as early as we can.”

“Monica left school long ago.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don't know. I saw her walking along the turf with Joe.”

“Who is Joe?”

“It is her classmate. They always wander together on the lawn whenever they have leisure.”

“Why didn't you tell me earlier?”

“You never asked me about her.”

“Yes, I did not ask about her because she had secured good grades in all subjects. How is she doing at school these days?”

“She told me that she is not good at Science and Mathematics these days. In the previous tests also she had secured very low grade.”

“Let her screw up her studies. I will screw her up. She will pay a very heavy price.” Jay was enraged at his daughter's intransigence.

Jay had reached America thirty years ago with the help of his brother who was kind enough to sponsor him, and managed to stay there. He was a factory worker and his wife, a janitor. They were working from morning seven to evening four. Jay used to take his two children to school at six in the morning and leave them there in the porch. He would go back to school after the factory work and pick them up. The kids had learnt to manage themselves. They would sit in front of the school building until the

school opened and get in. In winter, they used to suffer from the flu, but there was nobody to get them proper medicine or take them home after the school hours. They had small physique because they were undernourished during the tender age.

He drove away with Daniel and informed his wife, Margaret that Monica was wandering with her classmate, and she was not doing well in many subjects.

“We work all through the day, year after year to educate and settle these children. They don’t care what we are going through. They waste their time and lose wonderful opportunities in life.”

“I will not spare the rod and spoil her. Let her come home.”

At ten, Monica called,

“Dad, I need to be picked up. I wait for you at Regal?”

“Where had you been?”

“I went to the theater to watch a movie.”

“Did you go to the theater alone?”

“A friend of mine accompanied me.”

“Is it he or she?”

“It is she, my friend Amy.”

“Stay over there. I will come to pick you up in half an hour.”

He picked her up and asked when she was seated in the car,

“Who did you say accompanied you to the movie?”

“I said my friend, Amy.”

“What is her phone number?”

She gave her phone number and said,

“I don’t want you to call her.”

“Why?”

“They think you don’t trust your daughter.”

“Let them think whatever they want. I really don’t trust you, dear.”

“I lose my credibility at school.”

“Naturally, when you tell lies, you lose credibility. Tell me who did you accompany to the movie?”

“I went with Joe, a classmate of mine. He is a very nice guy. I like him a lot.”

“Who permitted you to go with Joe?”

“I went on my own. I don’t need anybody’s permission. It is my life and I lead my life the way I want.”

“My dear young lady, we want you to study well, take good grade and become a Physician. We are toiling day after day to get you good education.”

“Every girl in my school has a boyfriend. Papa, there is nothing wrong in it.”

“We are accepted here as Asian Indian Americans. You are growing up in a different culture. You can talk to Joe but you can’t go with him to a movie. I have no patience to explain the same matter over and over again. If you ever go out of the school premises, I will never trust you, okay.”

“Why Dad, what is wrong in going with Joe?”

“You will never understand. Unmarried girls should not move with boys.”

“What happens if they do? Many girls move freely with boys and date with them.”

“If you don’t listen to me, I know you are going to screw up your studies and end up working as a server in a restaurant throughout your life. You will not achieve your goal of becoming a surgeon or a Physician. Many young girls in their teen age give themselves to sensual pleasure and become unwed mothers to suffer throughout their life.”

“You are wrong. Nobody thinks you are right. They all go with boys but they score 4.0 GPA.”

“Don’t argue with me or else,”

“What will you do? You can hit me if you want but I don’t care.”

“What is your GPA this year?”

She sat tight lipped for a few seconds and hesitatingly said,

“I don’t know. They have not told me.”

“You are a born liar. I wish you were not born to me at all.”

“Even I did not want to be born to you. It was not my choice.”

“If it were India I would have hit you on your head but here the law does not permit. So you are saved.”

By then they reached home and Jay pulled up his car in the garage and went upstairs, leaving Monica behind. Margaret, her Mom was in kitchen. She went straight to her and asked,

“Mom, I am hungry. Give me something to eat.”

“I have prepared *dose* for you.”

“I don’t want your stupid *dose*. Give spaghetti.”

“I will prepare spaghetti tomorrow. Eat *Dose* today. I have taken lot of pains to prepare this.”

“I don’t eat that stupid snack. Get me granola bars and chocolates. Keep *dose* for yourself.”

“You are becoming impossible. You eat junk food and grow like a junky.” Her mother muttered. Monica went to her room and closed the door behind her.

Next day was a weekly holiday. It was nine in the morning but Monica still lay in her bed.

“Get up, Monica; we have to go to Church. We have to drive for an hour.”

“Mom I am not going anywhere. Leave me alone.”

“Monica, at least once in a week we have to visit Church and pray God.

“Mom, I don’t believe in God. If you believe in God, you go to Church. Don’t ask me to do what I don’t believe in.”

“Monica, you are too much. You do what we say up to eighteen and then, we leave it to you.”

“Mom, don’t waste your time. I am not going to Church. Okay?”

“Monica, get up and get ready to go or I will pull you out of the bed. Take shower immediately and dress up.”

She got up from her bed and went to rest room. In another fifteen minutes, she was at the dining table for the breakfast.

“Did you prepare Spaghetti?”

“Yes, did you take morning shower?”

“No, I took shower last night.”

“Don’t you know you have to take shower as soon as you get up from bed? All these years you never used to get out of your room without taking showers. Have you given up our culture or what?”

“I don’t care for your culture or religion. I can take shower whenever I want.”

“You can’t eat breakfast without taking shower.”

“I don’t eat then. Heck with your breakfast.”

She started to go back to her room, enraged by her mother’s refusal to serve food. Jay was doing his morning prayer. Annoyed and enraged by her obduracy, he cornered her and raised his hand to hit her. Margaret intervened and stood between them.

“It is against the law. Don’t hit her, please.”

“I can’t tolerate her indecent behavior. My blood is boiling at her impertinent and saucy behavior.”

“Touch me if you dare. I will call the police.”

Jay broke down and fell to the ground.

Next day, Jay came home late and stopped his car close to the mailbox to pick up the mail. He picked up two letters addressed him from Monica’s school. The progress report confirmed that she had scored ‘D’ in all subjects while Daniel had scored ‘A’ in all subjects.

“Monica, you have failed in all subjects and you may have to repeat them next year.” Jay bemoaned in agony at her dismal performance.

“I will read well for the next examination. It is not a big deal. I can beat all of them and secure the highest grade. But I don’t know why I have not been able to concentrate on my studies. I will try my best.”

“Look Monica, if you fail in the examination this year, we will throw you out of this house.”

“I promise you that I will get good grade in the coming test, dad.”

The examinations were over and she had failed in two subjects.

“Monica, you have failed in the examination. You had promised that you would pass with good grade.”

She stood like a statue and did not answer.

“I had told you that I would throw you out of the house. That is what I am going to do now. Get out of my house.”

“I have no place to go. Where do you want me to live?”

“I don’t care where you live and what you do. You are a curse to our family and we want you to leave”

Margaret intervened and told Jay,

“Jay, leave her alone. Let us advise her later. After all she is our daughter and where can she go if we throw her out.”

“I don’t care where she goes. Go she must.” He pushed her out and closed the door. He went to his room, threw himself on his bed and wept. Margaret followed him to his room and sat with him. He was not in a mood to take any advice from her. She sat there waiting for Jay to cool down. Two hours passed. Jay consoled himself, asked Margaret to open the door and call her in. Margaret ran downstairs and opened the door. She did not see Monica. She went out of the house and searched around but she did not get any clue. She ran into the house and informed Jay. Jay ran out and thoroughly combed the entire area but she was nowhere to be found. They went to the wood behind and searched the entire wood but it yielded no result. At last they reported to the police and they inserted her photographs in various newspapers. Monica had disappeared once and for all.

Monica left home, and there was a pall of gloom in the house. Daniel became lonely in and out of the house for he had no friends. His classmates did not take his poverty kindly. They used to make fun of him at every step and disgrace him so much that he stayed away from many school activities. If he had not got good grade, it was because of his circumstances and not because of his intellectual deficiency. He did well in school tests, submitted all his assignments in time and thus, he had earned the good will of his teachers. Years rolled by, and he moved from lower class to higher without their parents having enough time to appreciate his efforts and progress. He was so accustomed to lonely life that he never expected their parents to come home and share his joy or sorrow. He passed his twelfth grade with a good grade and moved to an accredited University.

Jay came home late at night everyday and his mother waited for him at the dining table. One night, both of them waited for Daniel at the dining table as it was his eighteenth birthday. Daniel had not yet returned from college that evening. They anxiously waited for him till midnight, and there was a pang of agony in their heart and a chill went through their spine when they imagined that the worst could have happened to him.

“Denial was never late. He would return home usually at seven. It is already twelve and he has not returned home. I don’t know if everything is all right. Did he ring up and speak to you anytime today?”

“No, he did not. I have no clue to his whereabouts.”

“He must have found a new friend, as otherwise he wouldn’t be wasting his time at this hour of the night.”

“I pity poor Denial. He has grown from childhood to adulthood alone. We never had time to think of him. We used to work until we were sapped of our energy and return home, tired and sleepy. He hardly ate dinner with us these many years. Today was his birthday and I came home early to prepare something delicious but he is not home. These days, I am missing him too much. He always looks left out.”

“I hope he understands us. We have toiled overtime all these years to help him for higher studies, but these days he seems to think that we have no interest in him.”

“He is studying in a University now and he may need good clothes and money for his expenses.”

“Yes, you are right. He needs some money for his expenses. He is no more a child. We shall try to save some money and give it to him for expenses.”

“I have decided to give him fifty dollars a month for his personal expenses.”

“I also give him fifty. He will have a hundred dollars for his expenses, and he has to manage with that money.”

“He is such a nice boy. He has never pestered us for money. We never felt that he was a burden to us. He never lets us feel that he is a burden.”

The doorbell rang and Margaret opened the door. Denial came in, hung up his jacket in the mudroom and went straight to his study as Margaret and Jay looked on.

“We wish you happy birthday, Denial.” His mother spoke softly.

“Thank you, Mummy.”

“Happy birthday, Denial,” his father greeted him.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“We came home a little early today to wish you happy birthday and prepare some delicious food. I have prepared your favorite dishes. We are waiting to dine with you.”

“I will be at the dining table in a few minutes.”

He went to take shower and was back in half an hour.

Although he had arrived at the table fresh, he was breathing heavily.

“Where had you been, Denial? You are looking so tired.”

“I went to work. Today is my first day at work.”

“We are working hard to help you, Denial. There is no need for you to work. We want you to study for another four years for your degree.”

“I assure you that I will fulfill your desire, father. I study well and come out of the college in flying colors.”

“You devote your full time for studies. We both work and pay for your expenses.”

“No Father, you have done more than you could and I am very thankful to you. I am on my own and I wouldn't bother you for my expenses.”

“You wouldn't be able to pass creditably if you earn and learn.”

“Just leave it to me and I will do it. I refuse to accept any help from now on.”

Both his parents stood wonderstruck at his determination. They said nothing. When the dinner was over his mother asked,

“Do you need any book or stationery?”

“I don't need anything. I have everything I need. You need to promise me about something.”

“What is it? What is it,” they asked anxiously.

“You should stop worrying about me. You have done enough. Take care of yourself.”

“He is now a matured man.” Jay said as Margaret nodded her head in agreement.

Four years rolled by. Margaret had become old pre-maturely because of sorrow and drudgery of work. Jay had retired from service

because of acute heart problem. Daniel completed his studies and applied for a middle management position in the factory where his father was working. He had the surprise of his life when the HR Manager gave him a supervisory job and asked him to start working from the very day. He drove home delightfully to inform his parents that he got a job. They were sitting with a melancholic face wiping out tears from their eyes.

“Mom, why are you crying? Is there anything wrong?”

“Denial today is your sister Monica’s Birthday. She left home ten years ago. We don’t know where she is, and what she has been going through; Life must have been very hard on her.” Margaret rued.

“Why do you always think negatively? Develop positive attitude, Mom, you have advised me always to develop positive attitude but you don’t practice what you teach.”

“It is easier said than done, my boy. We have been spending our life these many years, since she left us, on her reminiscences. We pray God that we meet our beloved daughter at least once. We will be the happiest on earth.”

Next day he went to the factory and started working there. His colleagues were saying that the new Chief Executive would visit the workshop any moment. Daniel was growing restless to see the Chief Executive. As soon as the new CEO entered the workshop, Daniel followed her through his eyes and suddenly uttered “Monica” in great astonishment as the CEO moved towards him. She had changed her name as Jennifer.”

Monica, my sister, do you remember your brother? It is me, Daniel” He spoke in a very low but distinct voice when she was at a hearing distance.”

“Certainly, can anyone forget one’s own brother? It is I who recommended you for the supervisory position.” She quipped as she passed by.

Their eyes became wet. They recouped from their emotional disposition as they noticed that there were many who were around furtively watching them. She went away. The same evening he was coming out of his factory when she sent words through someone to meet her. Daniel met her in her office. She quietly left the office and walked towards her car, Daniel following her at a distance.

When they were in the car, he asked, “Where are we heading to, Monica?”

“I am taking you to my home, Brother.”

“Where is it?”

“I live in Pepper Pike.” They were at her house in the next half an hour. She enquired about her father and mother. When she had finished, Daniel enquired,

“Won’t you tell me how your life was after you disappeared from the house?”

“Sure, Brother, I will tell you tomorrow when I will visit your house. I am anxious to see Dad and Mom.”

Next day, Monica came home and it was a great family reunion. All eyes were filled with joy. When the emotions subsided, Monica explained to her parents what happened after she left home.

“I was weeping near the mail box when you threw me out of the house. Our neighbor, Ram who happened to pass by me asked why I was standing there at that point of time. I told him that my father had thrown me out of the house and I did not know what to do. He took me home. I told them that I didn’t want to go back to the house and requested them not to inform the police. I called Joe on phone and he was there in an hour. He took me to his home. His foster-parents were so magnanimous and generous that they arranged for my study in a boarding school. All these years I was looked after like queen as they had no children. I was educated at an accredited University. They were immensely pleased with my intellectual ability and practical wisdom. I owe my progress and present standing in life to them.”

“Excuse me, my child; I was so foolish to throw you out of the house at such a young age. I am ashamed of myself. I never had peace of mind from that day. Now that I know that you are doing very well, I shall live in peace.”

“Don’t feel bad, Father. You really opened my eyes. You are really responsible for what I am today. I have scrupulously followed your code of conduct since I left your house. I must thank you.”

“Who fostered you, my child?”

“Johnson and Lady Johnson fostered me and Joe. They love me so much. They have huge assets. They are the proprietors of our factory.”

“Where is Joe, now?”

“He died three years ago in a motorbike accident.”

“I want to phone up right now and break the news to Johnson that you are my daughter and thank him for having looked after my daughter so well,” said her father picking the phone.

“She snatched the phone from him and said,

“This is the greatest disservice you can do to your daughter and to Mrs. and Mr. Johnson.”

“What do you mean?”

“If they come to know that I am the daughter of a worker in their factory, they will be embarrassed before their workers. You can’t do that disfavor to them who fostered me as their child; and I would like to remain as theirs.”

“We got you back after all these years of separation. Can’t we celebrate this reunion?” They whined.

“No, this is not reunion. We cannot live together as I am a part of that family now.” She walked out and drove away, as Daniel meekly looked on.

The End

Story Seven

Red Light Zone

Hari entered 'Formers Co-operative Society' in Patna and waited to meet its Secretary who was holding a meeting to disburse loans to some formers. He sat on a chair in the lobby anxiously awaiting the outcome of the meeting, as he was one of the applicants for loan. He could see through glass panes Hara, his brother, who was on the committee, arguing with the secretary with a red, grim face, but he could not hear what he was talking. Hari guessed that Hara was arguing with the secretary not to grant any loan to Hari as there had been long-standing enmity between the two over a property dispute. Hari fidgeted and walked hither and thither restlessly as he immediately needed loan to grow onions and potatoes, which would get him great profit that season. He waited impatiently for about thirty minutes in the lobby. The meeting was over and the members left the secretary's chamber one by one. Hara came out proudly, noticed Hari waiting anxiously, and gave a wry smile to scoff at him. Hari darted into the chamber to meet the Secretary, who avoided meeting his eyes and said fixing his eyes on the floor,

"I am sorry; the board has denied your application."

Hari was ranting and raving mad, wandering aimlessly in the streets of Patna for a few hours before he controlled his anger and started homeward cursing Hara. Hari came home and sat on a chair still fuming with rage, having suffered defeat in the hands of his brother. Reynolds, his younger son, not knowing what his father was going through, asked him,

"Papa, today it is the last day for admission or I will lose one precious year."

Hari did not reply. He thought for a while, raised his head slowly, and mumbled,

“My dear son, it pains me to tell you that I don’t have any money to pay for your educational expenses. You have to drop out of the college this year.”

“Papa, you must help me out or else, I will lose one year and it will have adverse effect on my life, papa, please.”

“I know, my son, but I am helpless. There is no means of raising money now for your education. Don’t bother me. Please go out my sight or I will be mad at you.” There was impatience and warning in his tone, which Raymond gauged and disappeared from his sight. Hari sat there thinking with his head bent. His wife Gulabi came out and stood before him.

“What brings you here,” he asked her without raising his head.

“Ray’s parents visited our house in your absence. They informed me that their son Ray has agreed to marry our daughter, Champa. But...” She stopped without completing the sentence.

“What?”

“They are demanding 25000 as dowry¹.”

“I don’t have any money to pay dowry. Ask them to wait till I find money.”

“Champa likes Ray, and she will be disappointed if this marriage proposal fell through.”

“Then he must marry her without dowry.”

“There is a way out” she said hesitatingly. “If we find a girl to our Ramsay, we can raise dowry and pay it to Ray.”

“Ramsay has no job. He is still under the mercy of the landlord. He can’t marry at this point of time.”

“I will request Ray’s parents to marry Champa promising payment within a year.”

“I have no objection if they agree. Where is Ramsay?”

“Ramsay has gone to Patna to meet our landlord. The landlord had sent words to meet him this morning. Hari went in and lied down on his bed.

It was late afternoon when Ramsay came out of his landlord's house and walked along the road towards the Central Bus Station. He had brought important and urgent news to the tenants from his landlord. Suddenly, the overhanging clouds burst out with pounding rain soaking him wet. He did not take shelter and wait for the rain to stop as there was no sign of rain abating. He had to reach his village before six as he was carrying an important message from the Landlord to his men. The rain had inundated the muddy roads with water and he waded his way to the bus stand. The bus was about to leave the station when he managed to hop in, and he stood hanging on to a belt, as the overcrowded bus started moving towards Sitapur. He was deeply immersed in his thoughts the bus reached Sitapur. He alighted from the bus and hurriedly walked another mile along the soggy, waterlogged road before he reached the village square. The villagers who were anxiously waiting for his return, surrounded to hear the news he had brought. He broke the news that the landlord would visit the village at six in the evening to address his tenants. The villagers became anxious to know what he was going to talk about. They started moving in the direction of the temple, the venue of the meeting, in anticipation of the landlord's arrival.

Sitapur was a small village in the suburb of the metropolis and Hari was the leader of the tenants who worked for the landlord, Manas. Manav, the half-brother of Manas, was constantly harassing Manas to part with half of his lands, but Manas had refused. Manav sought the help of some mercenaries who were opposed to Manas and offered them a lot of money to take possession of the lands by force. So there was constant war between Manav's men and Manas's men who would attack each other out of vengeance. The police accepted bribe from both parties and remained neutral. Every three months a battle would rage between the two groups and one group would raid, loot and set ablaze the other village and a few days later the aggrieved group would retaliate with more vehemence.

Ramsay was accompanying his father, Hari, to the temple. Suddenly Hari fidgeted and slowed down his pace.

"Why are you slowing down?" Ramsay asked surprised.

"My dear son, I have something to tell you urgently. Let the villagers go ahead and we will slowly follow them."

When they lagged behind, Hari said,

“Ramsay, six months ago we had beaten many of their folks to death. Today they are on to us to wreak vengeance. They will be at least one hundred in number and we have to wage a losing battle. By morning most of us will be dead.” Hari stopped walking and looked blankly at the sky.”

“Father, do you think we are losing this time?” he asked anxiously.

“I am sure most of us will be dead by morning” He repeated seriously.

“What shall we do now?”

“We have no time to think. We have to take a snap decision here and now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will never understand, my son, that you are a bonded laborer of Hari. My father borrowed one thousand rupees from Manas for my sister’s marriage and he could not repay the loan amount. Since then we have been serving him as bonded laborers, I mean the entire family. All my life I have been working for him for three quintals of food grains a year. It is nearly forty years since we have been deemed bonded laborers. I lost three of my brothers fighting for him and I am sure I am going to lose you tonight.”

Ramsay shuddered at the very thought and looked into his father’s face. Hari’s voice was feeble. Hari gathered strength and said in a distinct voice.

“Run for your life, boy, run for your life. Your life is in danger and I don’t want to lose you.”

“Father, how can I forsake you and go away like this?”

“Don’t worry about me. I have lived fifty-five years and I still hope to live. I have a plan for you. Do as I say. Go home at once collect your clothes and get going. Yesterday I sold the last piece of ornament on your mother’s body and I have with me 500 rupees. Take this money and reach Bangalore somehow. There is one Charles, a native of this village who is now a company Secretary of a big company He has promised me to get you a job. I had spoken to him when he visited Patna fifteen days ago.”

“I have never visited Bangalore. I don’t know the local language. I don’t have money to stay and find a job. I have no shelter to stay on. How can I thrive there?”

“My dear son, I understand your problems but you have to take calculated risk. You can’t risk your life every moment of your life for the sake of two meals. Run away immediately as the landlord will be here any moment.”

“If the landlord demands to know where I have gone, what have you got to say?”

“Stop worrying about me. Hey, don’t you hear the approaching sound of his motorbike? Get away. See you sometime if god wills. Bye, bye.”

Ramsay ran back home, packed his old, worn out and muddy clothes and went away to the village bus stand to board a bus to Patna by the time the landlord arrived to address his tenants.

“According to the reports reaching here there will be an attack on our village by Manav’s mercenaries today past mid-night,” he announced, and said, “I have come here to distribute guns for you. This battle is going to be decisive but beware that they are in greater number.” He distributed 25 riffles and left immediately. Suddenly there was panic in the village. The men folk bore sullen look and women panicked, as there was storm in their mind.

Three days later Ramsay reached Bangalore and met Charles who provided him employment and asked him to keep his belongings in the antechamber of his office, and sleep on the workshop floor overnight. First month was very hard for him for he had no sufficient money. He lived on a single meal, ate in a roadside restaurant and wore two old dresses he had brought. One month passed by and he got a salary of 3000 rupees. He sent by money order 1500 rupees to his father, the receipt of which his father duly acknowledged. He surmised that his father had survived the gun battle and wrote a long letter to his father expressing his satisfaction over the job and his present situation in life. His father replied,

“My dear Ramsay, I can’t express in words my happiness at your getting a job in Bangalore. I am very glad to know that Bangalore is a naturally air-conditioned city, with heat varying between seventy and ninety degrees. Bangalore is a beautiful city and I will plan to visit Bangalore once as soon as you settle down. Your sister’s marriage is scheduled for September eighth. Don’t feel bad if you can’t be present at your sister’s wedding. I have borrowed 25,000 for your sister’s marriage, and I need to repay it in installment. Please send 2000 every month. There

is no way that this family could survive without your help. If you settle down in Bangalore we will move to Bangalore and stay with you. Take care. Bye.” He had written the letter in a rustic language, but he was very specific of what he wrote.

Ramsay could not attend the marriage but managed to send five thousand rupees to his father by borrowing some money from his employer. Six months passed by, and Ramsay had two square meals and bought some clothes to put on. It was his life’s ambition that he should wear sunglasses like others on road and he fulfilled his ambition by purchasing an ordinary pair of sunglasses. He had access to his employer’s toilet, which he utilized to bathe every morning. It was a wonderful life from his point of view compared to poverty and penury he suffered at Sitapur.

Another two more months lapsed. He had money now to visit theaters and restaurants. He started making friends and moving with them. Then he thought that he should have a girl friend, as otherwise life would be boring. He wandered around the city in his leisure hours and took every opportunity to please women he came across by courteous behavior. Some women hated his looks and some, his rustic behavior. Some laughed at his anxiety to please them while others were rude to him. But he went on with his search for a girl friend nevertheless. One day, he became restless, as he was devoid of love and attention. It was early in the morning and when he came to ground floor he found a woman of twenty-five mopping up the shop floor. He gave a mild smile and thought that she would turn away from him. She started towards him. He shuddered at once at his stupidity of making a pass to an unknown woman and feared that she would complain against him to his supervisor. He was in for pleasant surprise. She returned the smile when she came close and asked him,

“Are you a new employee?”

“Not quite new. I am here for the last few months. I stay here upstairs. I came down this morning a little early because I had finished taking shower early.”

She stood there for a while looking at him. He guessed from the expression on her face that she was pleased to meet him. He was a little puzzled because he did not know how to react to her friendly overture.

“Do you come here to mop the floor everyday?” He asked fumbling for words

“Yes, I do.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Lucy.”

“I live here, upstairs. Hope to see you tomorrow,” he said and started to move upstairs not knowing how to proceed with the conversation. She nodded her head in agreement, and gave him a lingering look that sent shock waves in him. He reluctantly left the place and went up the stairs looking back twice to have her glimpse.

Encouraged by her looks and talks, Ramsay decided to befriend her. The whole night he was wide-awake thinking of her and could not sleep till early in the morning. Next morning he could not get up, as his head was heavy because of sleeplessness. Someone knocked at the door. He got up to see who it was. As soon as he opened the door he saw her at the door with a broad smile on her face. She was well dressed that day, and looked very attractive, with full of mirth on her face.

“Hi, your eyes are red. Didn’t you sleep last night?”

“I could sleep only for two hours.”

“You should take complete rest at night as otherwise you can’t work in the morning.” She suggested to him and he agreed with her with a nod. She was not in a mood to get back to work. He asked her taking a little courage,

“Where do you live?”

“I live in a slum nearby.”

“Are you not afraid to work in lonely places like this?”

“Sometimes I feel very uneasy to work here at this hour alone but I can’t help it. I have to keep my oven burning every morning.”

“How much money do you make here?”

“I make 2000 a month.”

“Who are all living with you?”

“I have a son aged four years. I leave him with a neighbor and come here to work.”

“Where does your husband work?”

“I am not married. I had a boyfriend in my village. We used to meet secretly in paddy fields. One day he raped me in the paddy field and consoled me that he would marry me in the presence of the villagers and

ran away without leaving his address. I became pregnant. I couldn't stay in the village, for the people would have ousted me, had they come to know that I was pregnant before marriage. I feared they might shave my head and parade me on a donkey before throwing me out of the village. Next morning I left the village and came to Bangalore in search of job. Someone helped me to find a job here. I have been working here since then." Her eyes were wet and she wiped tears from her eyes and cheeks.

"Oh, you are a damsel in distress!"

"I am in deep distress. I have no company and I am alone."

Next evening, when Ramsay came out of the factory premises he was surprised to see Lucy there.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to meet you."

"Do you need any help?"

"I was bored at home. I came to ask you if you would take me to a film. I have not seen a film in the last two years."

"Really, we will go to Regal. I too have not seen films for several months. I was longing for a company to go to a theater. Now that I have found a good company in you and you have found one in me, we can make merry in the days to come."

They went to Regal Theater, watched a Bollywood movie, ate in a restaurant and walked along the poor lit road late at night. She came close to him and held his hands. That was what he was waiting for. He kissed her gently on her cheek.

"Do you want me?" She asked him. Ramsay had great respect for women and he had not imagined that a woman would ask him that question.

"Yes, I want you." He said shyly and drew near to her.

"Call an auto. I will take you to my hut."

He could not resist the temptation of sleeping with her. It was his first tryst with a woman. He called an auto and they reached her hut in half an hour. It was ten in the night and he cautiously sneaked into her hut. She spread a mat and they slept together. When it was all over she gave him a gentle kiss and said,

"You are marvelous."

“Shall we meet tomorrow?” he asked her

“You don’t need my permission. I am yours always.” She gave him carte blanche permission.

He left the hut early in the morning at four and reached the factory premises. Now that he had chilled out, he started thinking all over again. His sexual appetite had overwhelmed him the previous night, he thought, and swore that he would never again do anything foolish. He thought of his parents who had been looking for his help. He thought of his sister who needed his help in setting up her family in Patna. ‘My father reposed so much of faith in me and relied so much on me that I should have been more careful with that woman,’ he said to himself and rued. He decided to stay away from her and made no attempt to meet her on the shop floor. She came up the stairs twice or thrice, and on finding his response lukewarm, stopped bothering him.

Three months lapsed and his father wrote that he was badly in need of money and the family banked on his support. He wrote to his father.

“Father, I know you are in deep trouble. I want to extricate you and your entire family from the position of misery and poverty and help you all to become self-reliant. I will educate my brother so that he will become a university graduate and live a comfortable life. I will see that you are cleared of your debts and freed from the bonded labor. Forbear all your worries for a year and I will assure you that you will lead a better life. Thanks father, for all your help you rendered to me, and you can count on me for the rest of your life. I will take leave for two weeks during Ganesha festival and come to you.

Yours affectionately,
Ramsay”

Ramsay encountered his employer, Charles, during the working hours the following day.

“Ramsay, you have lost lot of weight. You are looking dull and pale. Is there anything wrong?”

“No. I am fine. I eat out everyday and the food is not nourishing.”

“It could be so. Take care of your health. Anyway I recommend you to my physician who will thoroughly examine you and prescribe some dietary supplement. Meet him tomorrow morning.” Charles gave the

address of his physician and went into the office. Ramsay went to work but he started feeling uneasy.

“Yes, these days I am feeling weak and I get tired quickly. I have fever for quite sometime. I must make an appointment with the doctor,” he said to himself, and two days later, he approached the physician who asked him to undergo blood test. When he met the doctor next day, the doctor looked sternly at him and told him,

“There is something wrong with your body.”

“What is wrong, Doctor?”

“Answer my questions, first.”

“Oh, yes, I will.”

“Do you have any girl friend?”

“No, I don’t have any girl friend.”

“Did you sleep with any woman recently?”

“No Doctor, I have not.”

“Did you have any unnatural sex?”

“No Doctor, I have not.”

“Did any doctor administer blood into your body?”

“I am hale and healthy. No doctor administered any blood.”

“Gentleman, you are lying. You have tested positive to HIV/ AIDS.”

“What does it mean, sir?”

“It means that you are suffering from an incurable and terminal disease.”

“What sort of disease is that? I haven’t heard of such a disease.”

“This disease will kill its victim eventually. Most often the people who suffer from this disease die out of cancer or tuberculosis or any other disease.”

“Doctor, Will you save me from this disease. I want to live, doctor. My family needs me. I am still 17 years old and I want to live. Help me, doctor.”

He started weeping.

“Control your outburst, Gentleman. I am a doctor, not God. I can help you to some extent. That is all. The rest is in the hands of God. I will start treatment from tomorrow.”

“How much money may I have to spend towards medicine, doctor?”

“You will have to spend lot of money.”

“But I don’t have lot of money. I am a poor man, sir.”

“I can only sympathize with you but I can’t help you with free medicine. You have to spend money or suffer.”

“Okay, doctor, I will come back tomorrow for treatment” He started to leave. “Ramsay,” the doctor called, looked into his face and said, “Look, this disease is caused by viruses which a man contracts while having sex, if the other partner is already infected with such viruses. You should have been very careful while having casual sex. You must have had sex some months ago. Don’t deny. Speak the truth.” Ramsay suddenly remembered his encounter with Lucy.

“Yes, doctor, I had sex with a lady whom I hardly knew. But I did not know that I end up with such a deadly disease.” He once again started crying. The doctor consoled him,

“Look, there are many people who have lived tens of years with these viruses. If you are lucky, you too will live for some years.”

“That is some consolation, sir.”

“But you shouldn’t have sex with anyone. You will spread this disease to anyone whom you will have sex with. Keep off women and sex.” The doctor warned him. Ramsay turned away from the doctor unable to bear what was to come.

There was storm in his otherwise calm mind. “Oh God,” he said to himself, “What has become of me. Why did I ever go behind that woman?” He cursed and consoled himself after a while, saying, “After all death comes once in lifetime. Why shall I fear death?” The very next moments he remembered his commitment to his family and shuddered.

“How can I repay my father’s debt? How can I help my sister and brother in law? How can I help my brother for his education?” He was asking himself many questions but he had no answers to any of them. Ramsay wandered aimlessly in agony and despair in the city till evening and returned very tired. He went to the shop floor and lay there weeping for hours.

He decided not to meet the physician next day and went to work. He was feeling very tired as he was running high temperature. He received a mail from his father by post.

“Dear Ramsay, I will come to Bangalore to see you next Monday and stay with you for a week. There are many things that we have to talk about. You will be 18 in a few months. We are already receiving proposals

for your marriage. If anyone offers 25000 to you, I will accept the proposal. You should not say 'no'. Ray, your sister's husband, has been neglecting your sister, Champa, because we have not paid them the money we had promised at the time of marriage. I will borrow some 25,000 from the cooperative society and pay 10,000 to my son in law and 15,000 to the landlord and clear his age-old debts with interest. The weather forecast is very good for potatoes and onions during the next four months. We hope to make good profit from these crops. We are all having good time and all are praising you for helping your near and dear who have been afflicted with poverty. The village headman has selected you for an award as the best son of the village. I am very proud of you, my son, I am very proud of you. Take care of your health. Bye, Yours affectionately, Hari."

Ramsay was trembling now. He did not know how to break the agonizing news to his father, which would break his heart. He sat in a park and thought over the misfortune that had befallen him and his family. While at work, he was unable to concentrate on his work and the supervisor complained against him to his employer. Charles called him to his chamber and asked,

"How are you doing, Ramsay?"

"I can't concentrate on my job these days. It is a temporary phase and I assure you that I get over it."

"No Ramsay, you can't get over this because the physician told me what you are going through. The time has come when I shall discharge you from service. You better go back to your native place and come back when you are fit. You can collect your salary up to this date."

Ramsay went out of the chamber without speaking a word. He knew that it was useless to talk further as the Charles had already taken a decision based on the report given by his physician. He left Bangalore by the earliest train.

Next morning the Physician telephoned Charles and said,

"I am very sorry, Charles. Yesterday we wrongly diagnosed the case of Ramsay."

"What do you mean, Doctor?"

"Yes, our regular nurse was absent yesterday. The new recruit, a trainee nurse was asked to deliver the blood samples to the laboratory. She messed up the slips she was carrying and placed the slip of Ramsay under

someone else's blood sample. Ramsay has been wrongly diagnosed. We would like to retest his blood. Will you please send him tomorrow?"

Charles stood motionless for a few seconds recounting the gravity of the situation and said slowly,

"Doctor, your patient was so worried that he left the service and went back to his native village in dismay and despair."

"Charles you should call him back and apprise him of the fact. You should reinstate him in his job."

"It is too late, Doctor. I don't have his address. Anyway I will try to contact him at the earliest." He hung up and broke down.

"I should not have taken such a hasty decision," he said to himself, shaking his head sideways.

Ramsay reached his village in the next three days. Hari was surprised at his return but did not wish to probe into the matter further. The news gradually spread that he had contracted a deadly disease. The father of the girl who had proposed his daughter to Ramsay withdrew his proposal. His friends left talking to him. He was socially ostracized. I can't stand this ignominy; he said to himself and cried helplessly, sitting on the bank of the river flowing behind his village. One day his brother in law came and left her sister in his house saying I will not take her back into the family fold as her brother was infected with AIDS. Hari stopped meeting his friends and relatives, and the entire family suffered from the social stigma attached to the disease and its victim.

A year passed by and the family was isolated and ostracized and the village council had passed a resolution that the entire family of Hari must leave the village in a fortnight failing which they would be forcefully thrown out of the village.. A group of doctors came to the village and opened a camp for three days to create awareness among the village masses regarding AIDS. His father took him to the camp with a ray of hope. The physician took his blood sample in a test-tube and asked him to come back in the evening for the medical report. That evening he went to the physician expecting him to say that the disease had reached the final stage and that he would die soon. As soon as he met the doctor, Ramsay asked him,

"How long can I live with this disease, doctor?"

"Which disease you mean?" the doctor exclaimed.

“AIDS”

“You are not suffering from AIDS.”

“Are you sure, Doctor? Test my blood once again, Doctor.”

“I have already tested your blood twice. You are hale and healthy.”

“Do I really live long, Doctor? I can’t believe it.”

“You live hundred years,” replied the doctor.

“Doctor, you are joking.” he said wistfully.

“Certainly not, you are undernourished and you need to eat well.”

“A doctor examined me a year ago and told me that I was infected with AIDS. Are you sure it is wrong diagnosis, Doctor?”

“I guess, Ramsay, the nurse must have placed your paper under someone else’s blood sample out of sheer negligence. I dare say that medical report was wrong.”

“Thank you, Doctor, Thank you so much. You gave me a new life.” He went out merrily from there and informed Hari who was waiting for him in the lawn that he did not suffer from AIDS and the earlier diagnosis was wrong. They romped home in ecstasy. Suddenly the clouds of sorrow and misery cleared away, and the sun shone over their firmament, blue and clear.

THE END

Story Eight

They challenged an Empire!

One evening, Ajay, a sixteen year old, high school student, was walking his weary way towards home when he saw a Briton majestically walking along the road swinging his walking stick. A schoolboy who was standing on the roadside gave a broad smile to the British officer, overawed by his stature. The officer thought it was an insult if a native Indian boy smiled at him instead of saluting him. He was so angry at what he thought as insolence and deemed misdemeanor that he kicked the boy on his buttocks and walked away scot-free as the boy wriggled and wretched on the ground for sometime before he fell unconscious. Ajay did not sleep the whole night. He thought, "Indians are perpetually so afflicted by poverty, unemployment, ignorance and illiteracy that they have resigned themselves to their fate. The colonial government is more interested in protecting the economic interests of the British Empire than looking after the welfare of the native population. The people, who are accustomed to autocratic rule, would never revolt against the exploitation of the Colonial government. If the British had treated their subjects less harshly, they could have established a stronger empire. By ill-treating and despising them, they have hastened the process of disintegration of the British Empire. Hereafter I have only one mission in my life, to oust the British from India."

The atrocity of the officer left an indelible mark on his otherwise young and innocent mind, and he started a campaign against the colonial government. Ajay took an oath before the God that he would not rest until he ousted the British from India. He completed his school education and joined a college for his degree course. He shed his fear and took courage to discuss the British atrocities against the Indians with his fellow students. He formed a separate forum to discuss the ways and means of getting rid of the British from India. He addressed the students once,

“Ladies and Gentleman, we suffered for centuries under the Muslim rule, and now we are suffering under the yoke of the British who think it is ‘White Man’s burden’ to rule the rest of the world. These men came from a small island in Europe, which is smaller than a province of India, as traders and established their empire in India, perpetuating our miseries. We Indians must join together and oust the British from our country. Are you with me, Boys, in this grand task?”

“We are with you,” said one of them. “But how can we oust the British from India.”

“I think we shall start a Freedom Movement and publicly defy the British rule,” said another.

“No, The British are ruthless and we cannot face British guns unarmed. They will mercilessly butcher you,” said Ajay

“We have no arms and ammunitions. We cannot fight with sickles and knives, Can we?” Another student asked in frustration.

“The first war of independence failed because the people of India did not have weapons which would match theirs,” He explained to them.

“Then what course of action shall we take?” asked yet another.

“We have to kill mercilessly the British officers and create in them a fear psychosis. The British shall feel so insecure that no British officer would accept employment in India. They must be scared away from India.”

“Do you mean that we shall resort to terrorism?”

“In a way you are right. We shall be as merciless and senseless as they are but we are not killing the British senselessly. It is not atrocity against the British people. We will mark the British officers who work for the colonial government and kill them so that the British run away from India at the earliest.” The people were confused. It appeared an impossible task for most. They started dispersing saying,

“We Indians can’t kill a fly. How can we kill human beings? We are not a militant race.”

“Dear Folks, We are forced to resort to violence. The British never see reason and quit. They have no right to rule India. When they have formed democracy in their country and reduced the power of the king to

nullity, they have no right to subjugate Indians in India. Our first and foremost task is to oust the British from our country. I need your help.”

One of the students stood up and argued,

“The British rule is deep rooted in India. We have neither an organization nor money to fight the British in India. We can never face them. Your strategy is very good but it is very difficult to implement it”

A few students agreed that the British should be ousted by creating fear psychosis and assured him that they would support him in upholding that cause. Emboldened, he continued to speak,

“We shall form a Hindu State in India. We stand for ‘one country, one culture’, for the people bound by common blood and common race.”

“Do you mean to say that the Muslims should have no place in Free India?” asked someone in the audience.

“They have been staying here for centuries and they are a part of our nation. But they should live in India as Indians and owe allegiance to Indian nation.” They dispersed.

One day, one of his admirers introduced him to a man from London, Madhav. Madhav was a tall lean man in his early fifties. He was a very rich Indian in London and had opened a hostel for Indian students.

“This is Ajay, our underground revolutionary leader.” introduced one of his admirers.

“I am pleased to meet you.” He shook hands with him, and said, “India needs young men like you. “I am with you. I will provide you with all facilities for your activities.”

“My idea is to convince the Indians in London first. They go to England for studies, and return back to serve the British government. They must develop the spirit of nationalism, take up cudgel against the British, and lead Indians in the freedom struggle,” he declared.

“Your ideas are good. Even I have been working in the same direction. I have let my bungalow in London for the Indian students so that they all live together and discuss about their country’s future.”

“It is a great idea,” Ajay remarked and continued, “I have heard you are a great nationalist and a philanthropist too.” He gave a broad smile and said,

“Come to London for your studies next year and stay in my bungalow. Your fellow countrymen there need your guidance in this political movement. If you write to me, I will personally come to receive you.” Madhav said, and took leave of him. Ajay applied for London University and got admission with scholarship. He traveled to England in a frigate as in those days ships and frigates were the only mode of transportation between India and Britain. Madhav received him at the port with great enthusiasm

“How was your journey, Ajay?”

“It was very pleasant, sir. I enjoyed the journey.”

“Good. I am very happy that you are in London. Indians need your guidance here.”

“Have you read my revolutionary articles, sir?”

“Yes. That is why I am here. I agree with you cent percent. Come on, we shall go.”

Madhav took Ajay to his hostel where hundreds of Indians were staying. He introduced Ajay to the inmates and they became friends.

“I have told them about you and they deeply appreciate your ideas. You can count on them.”

“Thank you, sir.”

It was five minutes past mid-night on a Saturday night. Ajay, Yogi, Datta and Asghar were sitting in the hostel under a dim light discussing Indian politics in London. They were in total disagreement on the basic issues they discussed that they did not know how to go on with their conversation. There was silence in the room for sometime. All of them were deeply absorbed in thinking.

“I have an idea. We have to oust the British from India with the help of masses,” Said Yogi. There was an outburst of laughter.

“There is nothing new in your idea. We cannot oust British single-handedly. We need the support of the people. There are no two opinions

regarding this. The question is how to rouse the masses that are in deep slumber,” said Datta.

Ajay raised his head slowly, and bemoaned,

“Our people are poor and ignorant. They have no political consciousness or national spirit. India has been a geographical expression for 5000 years. It was never a nation. Even to this day there are more than 400 kings and chieftains ruling India. Our people are in deep slumber.”

“They will never think in terms of ruling themselves. We intellectuals should make candid efforts to persuade and educate them.” Yogi said.

“No amount of persuasion and education will rouse them,” said Ajay. “We have to build a small organization of educated and brave men who get ready to make sacrifices. We can’t depend upon the Indian masses.”

“No, you are wrong. No small group can face the British guns. It requires a mass movement to unnerve the British. We cannot win the British with the help of force. They have a well trained, paid army,” Yogi said emphatically

“We too must build up a strong army that could resist the British army,” said Datta.

“That is impossible. We have no money, no gun, and no arms. How can we fight the well-trained British army?” Ajay said shaking his head with disapproval. “That is why I said we need a small number of educated patriots who sacrifice their life for the sake of our country. We have to form an underground cell and clandestinely attack the British in their own nests. That will create a fear psychosis and no British will accept a position to serve in India. That will loosen the British grip on India. We can increase attacks on them day-by-day, from behind and that works out wonders.”

“You are wrong. You will never win. The murders and mayhems are no solutions. We have to win their heart by peaceful means. We must resort to Satyagraha, right?”

“Wrong. You will be shot and killed like a bird. That is a door to death.” Datta said.

“If a few people go on Satyagraha, they kill them. If thousands of people resort to it they cannot kill them all,” defended Yogi.

“How can you keep thousands of people under your control? When a large number of people come out on roads they resort to violence. They become a directionless mob and go out of control you will be creating anarchy in India. We need a strong dedicated army for this task,” Datta said insistently.

“No, I need masses, not army men for the task. We must instill in the masses a sense of discipline and they must work under the aegis of our organization.” Yogi explained.

“It is a wishful thinking. They pretend to be law abiding in your presence but behind our back, they become ruthless hooligans.” Datta advised.

“I am confident that if I create a large number of disciplined people to take on the British in a non-violent way, the British will quit India,” asserted Yogi.

“Let me see. When do you start your movement?” Ajay enquired

“Not immediately.” Yogi said, “I will start my movement when I go back to India.

“We can’t wait for your movement. It is abominably slow process. We must start something immediately.” Ajay hastened to add quickly.

“You are right. I am going to set up a well-trained army from now on.”

“You are crazy. God be with you.” Yogi said

“I will set up underground cell and kill the British officers one by one.” Ajay declared.

“You are equally crazy. I am not with you.” Yogi expressed his disapproval.

“We don’t need you. We need people of a different mould,” Ajay said, breaking off with Yogi.

“We are with Yogi on one condition,” Asghar said. “That we Muslims must have a prominent role to play when India becomes independent,”

“I assure you that in free India, Hindus and Muslims live like brothers, and the Muslims will have their due share in government. I don’t mind even if the Muslims rule the country provided they participate in overthrowing the colonial government,” Yogi begged for Asghar’s cooperation.

“Are you crazy to give Muslims this kind of encouragement? Don’t seek their support and don’t promise them anything. We had been suffering under the hands of Muslims for 1000 years. Would you allow them to establish Muslim rule over India once again? Your remedy is worse than the disease. We want freedom from both the British and the Muslims. Understand.” Ajay admonished in exasperation

“The Muslims have come to stay in India. They are deep-rooted in India in every walk of life. We can’t oust them,” argued Yogi uncannily.

“If you make any attempt to oust us, we will wage a civil war. We will butcher all Hindus and establish our rule in India.” Asghar revealed his mind.

“The Hindus will not sit quietly and watch you massacring them. They have fighting spirit as much as you have,” challenged Ajay.

“What did the Hindus do when Ghazni, Ghoris, Aladdin Khilji and others massacred the Hindus? They became slaves of the Muslim rulers. You people are timid and peace loving. You can never win a war against the Muslims,” Asghar said mockingly and laughed sardonically.

“Wait and see what we do,” Ajay said as he walked out of the meeting.

“We will work together Asghar when the time comes,” consoled Yogi, as Asghar got up to leave.

The Secretary of State was looking infuriated because a seemingly innocuous party was talking of self-government for Indians.

“Call the viceroy in,” he ordered his assistant.

In a few minutes, the viceroy walked in. The Secretary, who was wistfully looking out of the window, slowly looked into the face of the Viceroy and said in a low voice,

“Please be seated. What is wrong with these Indians?”

“They are talking of self-government. There is growing political awareness among them.”

“India is still a geographical area with four hundred kings and Nawabs ruling over it. They are ready to scuttle any political movement to safeguard their throne.”

“By giving English education to the Indians we are doing great disservice to the British Empire. The educated and intellectuals are now the bane of the Empire.”

“Have the Muslims joined the Hindus in seeking self-government?”

“Yes, the Hindus and the Muslims are united to oust the British from the Indian sub-continent.”

“Then the matter is really serious and it must be addressed immediately.”

“I really wonder if we can address this problem.”

“It is awfully simple. Divide and rule.”

“What do you mean?”

“United they stand, divided they fall. Divide the Hindus and Muslims. Set up one against the other and perpetuate the British rule in India. We shall have a plan of action.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It is easy. Separate areas with the Muslim majority from the areas with the Hindu majority. The first step towards this end is to partition Bengal into East Bengal and West Bengal, the Punjab, into East Punjab and west Punjab. East Bengal has vast Muslim majority and West Bengal has vast Hindu majority. We can put them down when they are separated. We will create a new consciousness among the Muslims that they are a separate nationality. We must start this process forthwith. The division of the Punjab can wait but the division of Bengal is imminent.”

“Your idea is brilliant. We will partition Bengal. Calcutta is the nerve center of all political and rebellious activities. That needs to be taken care of first.”

“Remember this is our established avowed policy henceforth. Muslims will have separate representation. They will have reserved constituencies.”

“You may issue a proclamation to this effect immediately. I will sail back to India and make preparation for the division of Bengal.” The viceroy sought the Secretary’s permission to leave and walked out of the room to the foyer, where he stood pensively smoking cigar. A few minutes later, the secretary’s assistant informed him that the Secretary wanted to see him again.

“Sit down. We shall talk about our strategy. The matter is urgent.” The Secretary said as the Viceroy sat down.

“Till yesterday the people were in deep slumber. Do you mean to say they have become politically conscious overnight?”

“Not at all, the masses are in deep slumber. They won’t wake up for another hundred years. There is growing spirit of nationalism only among the educated and the Intellectuals.”

“A handful of educated and intellectuals can do no harm to the British empire. By the way, who is their political leader?”

“They have no national level leader. Each area has its own leader. They are afraid of the British guns.”

“In that case, adopt the iron hand to rule the native Indians. It is after all ‘White man’s burden,’ you know to rule these uncivilized and brutish.” He chuckled. The viceroy laughed to his heart content.

A few months later, the Secretary spoke to the Viceroy.

“What is happening over there?”

“Many terrorist organizations have sprung up. They have decided to kill the British officers.”

“Why do they want to kill the British officers?”

“They want to create in the minds of the British fear psychosis so that they, fearing the assault on their life, run away from India.”

“Put down the rebellion with iron hands. Give them death Okay?”

“Our officers are great. They are sending everyone against whom there is a charge of waging war against the state to the gallows so that they dare not take on the British.”

Ajay started studying in the London University but his thoughts were always on the liberation of India from the clutches of the British. Ajay built a small underground organization, obtained some revolvers and trained one of his men, Nag for accurate shooting. Two more were trained as standby. One day he called Nag and told him,

“You know there are a number of terrorist activities going on in this country because the British have partitioned Bengal much against the wishes of the Bengalese.”

“I agree with you. Their policy of ‘divide and rule’ will create great tension in the region between the Hindus and the Muslims for hundreds of years to come. We have to put an end to the British rule and save our country from massacre and bloodshed.”

“They have been catching hold of the revolutionaries and executing them mercilessly. The man, who has been responsible for these executions, is James. Tomorrow he will arrive at the town hall. You have to kill him from a point blank range. Okay?”

“I shall do it for the sake of my country.”

“Good.”

Next evening, Nag went to the Town Hall with a pistol concealed in his coat pocket. He stood amidst the people waiting for James to arrive. He waited resolutely for two hours and the entourage did not arrive. It was announced that the Governor had cancelled the tour and James would not arrive. Nag returned disappointed.

A few months later, Ajay showed him a pistol in London and told him,

“This is meant for killing James, the British officer who sent many nationalists to the gallows.”

“Give me the pistol. I am going to kill the officer,” Nag said resolutely.

“Do you have enough guts to shoot him?”

“Yes, I have.”

“When are you getting back to India?”

“I am getting back next Monday.”

“It is impossible to carry any pistol with you. I will somehow smuggle this pistol to India when you are there. It will reach you safely. You can go ahead with your task.”

One day, a crew member of a frigate, stayed with his friend in the hostel, and Ajay met him secretly and requested him to help out in the smuggling of the pistol.

“Being an Indian, it is avowed duty to help you in this noble cause. I shall safely deliver to Nag,” said he, carrying the pistol with him.

The mariner contacted Nag and delivered the pistol. Ajay was sure that he would be caught if Nag were arrested. ‘That was the least I can do for my country at this juncture,’ he said to himself and got ready to face the consequence.

A few days later, Nag managed to kill James, but the police caught him. The British newspapers widely reported the murder, but an Indian magazine in Britain featured an article which stated that it was political assassination and not murder. The article was in fact written by Ajay. The British sleuths immediately sprang into action, and an officer in charge ordered,

“Arrest the author.”

“On what ground, sir?” asked his assistant.

“Sedition”

“But, sir...the author is absconding.”

“Arrest the printer or any one of those rascals, I don’t care,” ordered the officer and the printer was arrested.

A meeting of the Indian students was in progress. Yogi, a moderate, denounced the murder in no uncertain terms.

“We shall get independence without killing anybody.”

“Has any country won independence without bloodshed?” Ajay asked Yogi.”

Yogi stood silently for a second and then spoke composedly,

“I want to see India liberated without any bloodshed.”

“Countrymen, do you think that it is possible?” Ajay questioned the audience who shot back in chorus, ‘impossible.’

Ajay went to the dais to speak. The auditorium became silent. He spoke for half an hour.

“India will never achieve independence without violence. Killing and get killed is a part of the saga in any country’s independence movement, be it India or any other country. We are going to kill the colonial officers and scare them away.”

Ajay got great applause and concurrence from the audience which left Yogi disappointed. He hardly came across people who believed that India could become independent without resorting to armed conflict with the British. He left the meeting in a huff.

The British sleuths got inkling that the abettor of public prosecutor’s murder was a student from India by name Ajay. They arrested Ajay in London and deported him to India on a frigate along with security guards to stand trial for murder. The frigate reached France and was anchored there for a long time. Ajay managed to pass through a hole in the frigate and swam ashore, giving slip to the guards in order to contact Madhav, his mentor but he could not find him as he was not in France at that time. The British guards informed the French police who managed to catch hold of him. The British charged him as a fugitive and asked for his custody. Ajay wanted to tell them that he was not a fugitive but a freedom fighter from India, who has come to seek political asylum, but he did not know French and so, he could not convince them. Eventually he was handed over to the British guards. The British brought him to India, tried him in an Indian court and condemned him to prison for twenty-five years. He was kept in solitary confinement in an island prison.

In prison Ajay had enough time to think what course of action he should take in the interest of his country. He thought sitting in jail will serve no purpose, and India needs his guidance. He decided to get out of the jail and set up an organization for pursuing his political mission adopting Machiavellian diplomacy. He appealed to the colonial administration to excuse him and release him. The administration demanded an undertaking from him that he would not plot against the British. Some of his supporters advised him not to give any undertaking as

his political adversaries would malign him to belittle his personality. He silenced them saying,

“No useful purpose will be served if I make it a prestige issue. The question is not whether my prestige will go down. The question is how to release India from the British yoke. I don’t want to sit in prison because India needs my service, and Indians, my guidance at this juncture.” The British released him on the condition that he would not plot against the Colonial government. He sacrificed his educational and career opportunities, and his own happiness for the sake of India even before any body thought of Indian independence.

One day Ajay received a letter from Yogi, which surprised him. He opened the letter and was more surprised to know that Yogi was coming to meet him. On the appointed day Yogi met Ajay and discussed many political issues.

“Ajay, how is your life going on?”

“I am living dead. “

“I told you not to indulge in killings but you did not listen. Now you are ensnared in your cage. You cannot serve your country in any way.”

“I have given an undertaking to the British that I would not plot against the colonial government. But I can get it done. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Remember, you will never succeed.”

“Do you think that you will scare away the British with your gaunt body by means of Satyagraha?”

“I am confident I do it. I will raise such a storm with my movement that the British will be knocked out.”

“You rely too much on Asghar and his men. They are too tough for you. Be careful. They would outsmart you.”

“Most of my life has been spent with the Muslims. I can handle them.”

“They will never fall in line with you for a Hindu dominated State of India. They seek a separate State for the Muslims.

“I know Asghar. He will never stab me at the back.”

“For him, his community is important. He will force division of the country. You will weep in your later years for the mistake you are committing now”

“I will prove one day that I was right and you were wrong.

“High hopes, eh. Good luck to you.”

While ostensibly Ajay was leading a life of recluse, he met some of his supporters secretly after he came out of jail and advised them to take charge of his political movement and carry out his task of building an independent Hindu India. Sham, a staunch supporter of Ajay, came forward and established a new organization in pursuit of his goal. That organization actively participated in the freedom movement surreptitiously, created insecurity among the British officers by resorting to violence, and made its contribution in the struggle for Indian independence without attracting the notice of the Colonial Government.

The viceroy entered the chamber of the Secretary of state.

“What is new? What brings you here?”

“I have good news to you. Our plan has worked wonderfully well. The Muslims have begun to feel they are a separate entity in India. Now they fight against the Hindus. We sit and watch them fighting.”

“You are really great. The empire will remember your services for ever.”

“What is your next step?”

“There is one Asghar. He is fond of Britain and its culture. He has taken the leadership of the Muslim community. He could be our trump card.”

“Bring him here. I want to talk to him.”

“He is waiting to meet you in the lobby. Shall I bring him in?”

“Bring him with great honor.”

The viceroy ushered in Asghar. When he was seated in the chair after the exchange of courtesies, the Secretary asked him,

“I am glad that the Muslims have at last realized that they are a separate community.”

“We Muslims want a separate state for the Muslims in case you give independence to India.”

“We are not giving independence to anyone. It is not Hindu India or Muslim India it is British India wherein we want the Muslims to live as honorably as the Hindus. We don't want the Muslims to be dominated by the Hindus.”

“We will not tolerate the Hindus ruling the Muslims. We protest.”

“We want you to raise your protest publicly and fight for your rights.”

“I am sure we can agitate for a separate administration with your support.”

“Of course, the colonial administration will leave no stone unturned to give a due place for the Muslims in the Indian polity. There is no need to make any compromise with the Hindus on this matter.”

“Thank you so much. We, Muslims, will help you in your confrontation with the Hindu nationalists.”

“You are welcome. Stay away from Yogi and oppose whatever he says. Build a Muslim opinion against Yogi and his party.”

“You leave it to me. I can take care of the Muslim interests.”

“Good bye, Mr. Asghar.”

“Good bye, Mr. Secretary.” The meeting was over. He came back to India, organized a Muslim party and started confronting the Yogi's party.

The day was hectic for Yogi as Asghar called on him in the evening. Yogi was tired and really needed rest but he decided to talk to Asghar and it was a very prolonged conversation.

“It was a very long time since we met, Asghar.”

“I know. I wanted to meet you sometime but I was entangled in a love affair out of which I could not extricate myself.”

“Love is a magic. It may strike anybody anywhere. But I did not expect you to be a victim of it. I thought you are a hard nut and no one can entice you.”

“I myself thought so but that was not to be. A girl by name Noor started showing keen interest in me.”

“How old was she?”

“She was in her sweet sixteen.”

“O God, a girl of sixteen fell in love with a man of forty! It is very strange. You must be a very attractive man then.”

“She said that I was very attractive.”

“Didn’t you advise her that the age difference could harm your marital relationship?”

“I tried to convince her in several ways but she was determined. She said she would marry me or none.”

“Didn’t their parents object to her marriage?”

Her father warned me not to talk to his daughter. She started meeting secretly on the beachside. He saw us together one day and confined her to her bedroom. He even brought an injunction from the court. She waited until she became eighteen and then we got married.”

“Why didn’t you bring her together with you? I would have had a chance to meet her.”

“But she is dead now.” His face became pale.

“Died of what?”

“She was very ill at the time of her death but I don’t know of what.”

”What do you mean? You are a foreign returned, well educated man, and you don’t know what your wife was suffering from!”

“Yogi, she was not with me when she died. Our relationship had suffered a great deal shortly after the marriage. She was never happy with our marriage. She used to quarrel frequently and she became mentally imbalanced. She left my house and started living separately. One day the news of her death reached me” He was recollecting his past memories.

“Yogi was deeply moved by that episode and sat silently for a few minutes. Then he asked getting up from a reverie,

“Asghar, what has brought you here?”

“Yogi, I left India and went away to London to start a new life there but your man, Sunil, would not let me live there in peace.”

“What did he do to you?”

“He is telling everyone that my days are over and I am finished. Could there be worse propaganda against me?”

“I will tell him to be more responsible. Don’t worry.”

“I don’t worry. I will make the life of your people miserable now.”

Yogi thought something serious was afoot and braced himself up to hear very unpleasant and unhappy news.

“What are you talking? Explain.”

“I packed off my luggage and came back to India to take part in Politics. Now I will teach you and your people a lesson.”

“Asghar, Should you take such a drastic step and view one’s loose talk so seriously as to change the course of your career?”

“I will teach you people a lesson.” He repeated his face grimaced.

“Okay, Asghar, you were so particular about Hindu-Muslim unity. You agreed with me on this matter, but nowadays you are giving a contradictory statement that baffles me.”

“Yogi, we thought when the British would leave India, both Hindus and Muslims will run the government for all time to come in coalition. But you people have already started forming government without sharing power with the Muslims. We are now convinced you want to rule the Muslims. The Muslims never submit to your rule.”

“We have not yet got independence. We will make agreement on running the government once the British leave this country. Forbear!”

“No Yogi, I know you cannot influence your own men like Vinod. He says there are only two parties in India for the purpose of negotiation, Hindus and the British. He has totally ignored the Muslims. It is unacceptable to us.”

“Please don’t jump into conclusions. We will sit and talk.”

“Henceforth we sit and talk only with the British. We want separate State for Muslims.”

“Asghar, please don’t create problems. We will oust the British first. We will rule together. If you want to rule India, I will let you rule. But don’t stall India’s independence. I beg you. For heaven’s sake, don’t put any obstacle in the path of the country’s freedom movement.”

“Yogi, I don’t believe you. You are a Hindu sympathizer and you are yourself a Hindu. You will never help the Muslim cause. You pay only lip sympathy for our cause. We don’t accept you as our well-wisher.”

“What did I do to lose your confidence?”

“Your world is Hindu world. You want to uplift the Hindus. You want to bring about social reforms among the Hindus. You want to develop Hindu culture. You are a Hindu and you will remain a Hindu. We have nothing to do with you.” He started leaving the place. Yogi stood there dumbfounded.

Datta was a great freedom fighter in the party floated by Yogi but he did not agree with the concept of non-violence of Yogi in freedom struggle. Yogi’s method of non-violence irritated him because it was like a deer attacking a lion barehanded. He believed only a well trained Army can defeat the British in an outright war, and save India from the British rule. Datta was fretting and fuming against the British but he did not have an army of soldiers to counter them. He continued to work with Yogi while advising all the time to take on armed struggle against the British. Yogi thought he would influence the mass to take up arms and his Satyagraha movement will suffer. So he set up all his supporters against him and forced Datta leave his organization. Datta left the organization disillusioned. “Yogi was no match to the colonial government.” Datta thought. He decided to advise Yogi once again. He met him once in his den and the argument ensued.

“Yogi, I am not angry that your ego has forced you to throw me out of your organization. Start freedom struggle forthwith without committing yourself to non-violence. The entire mass of people will run over the British possessions.”

“Even if we oust the British by violence, we cannot retain our independence with this unruly mob forming government. The people must learn discipline before they ask for independence.”

“Yogi, India consists of such people who have no sense of discipline. Indians will never be disciplined for hundreds of years to come. You can’t wait for them to become disciplined. Let alone the masses and organize a militia to fight the British. We need a well disciplined Indian army to fight the British.”

“I know you are going to organize an army. I oppose your plan. The British are fighting the axis forces and it is time we help them win the war. When the war is over we can continue our freedom struggle.”

“Yogi, you have changed your attitude with regard to the British too. You want people to participate in the British war efforts. You want Indians to join war on the British side, and against the axis. You are ready to accept whatever they throw at you as bait. Are you in your sound mind? I think that you are too old for leading the nation now. You must retire.”

“My own men have thrown me out of the organization. No body wants to listen to me and I have really lost confidence in myself. I want to take rest. But my love for my country will not let me leave them to do whatever they want.”

“You are out of your own organization and no one is listening to you. Sunil is the real leader of this country now. He has cold-shouldered you and your policies. He is negotiating with the British directly without your knowledge and consent. The viceroy negotiates with him and you are nothing. They are only eulogizing you in front of the masses to gain people’s support. They are using your name for their end. Don’t let it happen. You take leadership or quit politics so that others can take up the mantle. I have come to tell you this. I start my own movement. Now that the war is on, this is an opportune time to take on the British.”

“I think this is the most inopportune time to take on the British. They are at war against the axis forces. We can’t let axis destroy them. We must help them in their present crisis.”

“My dear man the British are not your friends. They are your enemies. They are here to plunder the wealth of this nation and serve their own economic interests. This is the best time to hit out at them. The Japanese are at the borders of India. Rangoon is falling to their hands. Hitler will bomb England shortly. The British are on the run. This is the most appropriate time to strike at them.”

“I can’t do that. You go ahead and do whatever you want. Wish you best of luck,” said Yogi and went in, leaving Datta to himself.

Datta decided to adopt his own strategy. He clandestinely escaped to Burma when the Japanese army conquered Rangoon and went to Mandalay to meet the Japanese authorities to seek help from them. They assured that they would release the Indian soldiers captured in Burma to join Datta’s army. “At least one hundred thousand soldiers will join your

army, which you can deploy against the British on the Indian borders. Many of the British Indian army will desert the army and join your army. Your army will have no difficulty in conquering British India.” The Japanese assured Datta. After six months, when the Japanese started losing the war, Datta became unnerved, deeply disturbed by what was to befall on him. One midnight, a messenger arrived and asked him to meet the Japanese Authorities in Rangoon. When he reached Rangoon, they told him that the tide of war had turned against them; that they were leaving Rangoon as Hitler was losing series of battles in Europe; and the Americans were threatening to attack Japan. Datta returned in masquerade and stayed on a supporter’s farm house on the outskirts of a city, deeply disappointed by the turn of events. Nithin, a trust-worthy supporter met Datta with a burning lantern in his hand at the dead of night.

“Is my family safe?” Datta asked him

“Of course they are safe. The Government has placed five detectives around your house expecting you to arrive there.”

“Do you have any inkling as to what the government is up to?”

“They are hunting for you and if you are caught they are sure to put you to death for sedition.”

“I am longing to meet my family. My mother must be anticipating my arrival. O God, give me strength to face the situation.” He wept loudly but Nithin consoled him.

“There is no time to get emotionally disturbed. Please control yourself. We have just an hour to leave this place. The British men may surround this place anytime. Tell me briefly what happened to your mission in Rangoon”.

Datta said, “I escaped to Rangoon overnight before the British could get me and started secret talk with the Japanese authorities. I asked them to invade India and suggested that they should send an army unit immediately. They said that at the moment it was not possible because of their war commitment and asked me to wait. However an Indian army unit, consisting of several thousand men, surrendered to the Japanese army, and they gave all the prisoners of war to my control to use them against the British. I named my army as Datta’s Army, and I placed the army units at the border to invade India at the right movement. I set up an exile government. But soon the tide turned against the axis and they started losing the war. Rangoon fell back to allied hands. I told my supporters that

he was taking a plane to Japan. I asked my supporters to spread the rumor that the plane met with an accident and I died. They even vouched that they had seen my body being charred to death. But the Japanese government denied that there was any such accident as claimed by my supporters. The British government had been searching for me. I disguised myself as an ascetic in yellow robe and made good my escape to the Himalayas. I lived in a cave for three months. I could not stay there without seeing my family members. So I came to ask you if it is possible to meet my family without drawing the attention of the British.”

“I am afraid you are encircled by detectives from all sides and it is not wise to go anywhere near your place.”

“I believe you. I take your advice seriously.”

“Did you get any assurance from Russia that you will be given asylum?”

“Of course, they have assured me that they will receive me at their borders. They have made a secret plan for my stay in Russia.”

“I hope you are safe in their hands.”

“Of course, I am. I will meet the Head as soon as they allow me to their country and express my gratitude to him.”

“Make sure that no Indian will notice you in Russia as otherwise the news will spread like wild fire.”

“I know I have internal enemies. Sunil is aspiring for the highest position in Free India even before ousting the British. He thinks that I am his adversary number one for the coveted position. He will inform the British about my whereabouts to eliminate me from the competition. Yogi has teamed himself with him because he hates me from the bottom of his heart. They want to preserve their popularity and position at my cost. They are on to destroy me politically”

“I know Datta, they want to have their way in free India and regard you always as an obstacle. They would never let your popularity grow.”

“You are right. I have lost my India forever. If I ever enter India I will be maligned and betrayed. I will leave this place at two in the morning. A vehicle arrives here at one and I will be gone. Remember that nobody knows about this plan except you and the van driver.” He hugged Nithin as the tears rolled down his eyes. Nithin was gone and Datta stood

there in the dark.” At one in the morning an ambulance arrived and two men carried the ascetic in the yellow robe on a stretcher to the van. The Van slowly moved away.”

Yogi was sitting in his drawing room when Vinod walked in. Vinod was an Indian intellectual and was highly respected among the educated Indians. He was a popular figure in his sixties. His son Sunil was a right hand man of Yogi. Yogi knew that there were ideological differences between him and Sunil but he liked the way Sunil expressed his disagreement. He was a very soft spoken, fine gentleman but his views were in contrast to Yogi. Yogi tolerated dissidence but not outright, verbal rejection of his ideas. After the exchange of courtesies, they settled down for serious discussion.

“How are you doing, Yogi?”

“I am not fine these days. There is great deal of disobedience among my supporters. They do not respect me as much as they used to do. I have decided to retire from active public life.”

“You have taken a good decision, Yogi. It is time for you to retire from politics. There are many young people in this country who can lead our nation.”

“I hope so. I had hoped that Datta will take charge after me, but he has turned a revolutionary and I hate revolutionaries. They cause mind-boggling violence and bring untold miseries around. We want a young man who leads India’s destiny.”

“I think Sunil is the right kind of man for you Yogi. You can depend upon him.”

“I too was just now thinking that only Sunil could take charge of our freedom struggle.”

“Yogi, I suggest that you should give leadership to Sunil and involve your self in social reforms.”

“I will declare that Sunil is my successor in the general body meeting. I trust him more than I trust anybody.”

Vinod got up from his seat and readied himself to leave the place.

Yogi said, “Tell Sunil I abdicate myself in his favor. Bye.”

Vinod went home and reported to his son what transpired between him and Yogi, and sought his opinion.

“My son, you have got the greatest opportunity to lead Indian political scene. Don’t say ‘no’. I am sure that the people of India need you.”

“But I don’t agree with Yogi on many matters. How can I replace him?”

“What are the issues on which you differ from Yogi?”

“He is fawning before Asghar and surrendering the interest of billions of people of India for the sake of Hindu-Muslim unity, which not many Muslims want. They have rallied around Asghar for a separate State for the Muslims. They don’t want any kind of compromise.”

“You adopt your own policy, once you become the leader. What else do you disagree with?”

“Yogi is asking our people to serve in the British army to facilitate British victory. It is a grave mistake. On the one hand he is fighting the British for our independence, but on the other hand, he is asking people to strengthen the hands of the British. He is too old now and does not know what he is taking about.”

“You are the leader and you can guide the people the way you want.”

“Okay Dad, I agree with you. I take up the leadership of the freedom struggle. Once I become the leader I would want him to leave our committee. I will not even invite him to our meetings.”

“Whatever you want you do but don’t say that you oppose him. Don’t criticize Yogi publicly. He has millions of followers.”

“I understand, father. I assure you that I will not criticize Yogi but I can’t assure you that I will not criticize Datta. Datta is my adversary because he has much larger group of followers than I have. In fact I have no followers. The people follow me only because Yogi asks the people to follow me.”

“That is true. Datta may be a bottleneck in the path of your progress.”

“I will never help him recover from his present position.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“I have intelligence reports that he has sought asylum in the Soviet Republic. I do nothing to bring him back. He is sure to become a hero if he comes back.”

“Once the British quit India he is sure to come back and challenge your supremacy.”

“He is afraid that the British will catch him if he shows up. So he won't come back until we support his entry. We will never do that mistake and he will never come back.”

“As you please, but don't tell anyone that you know his whereabouts. Let the sleeping tiger lie in the abyss of Russia.”

“I have nothing against him Father, but I am not an angel to let people take away my chair. There is a bit of politics in it. Be it so. I never tell anyone whether he is alive or dead now or in future so that no one will make an attempt to bring him back.”

“I understand you jealously want to safeguard your interests even if it means a bit of villainy, eh.” Both of them laughed loudly as his young daughter looked on.

“It is not villainy, father. It is just a suppression of information.”

Nobody knew where when and how Datta died. He never returned to India or if he did, he was under disguise throughout his life. He was never again declared a living national hero.

The secretary of State was sitting fidgeted in his office. The viceroy was sitting opposite to him silently.

“We won the war but London treasury is bankrupt. We can't hold on to overseas territories. Our policy henceforth will be to relinquish the overseas territories.”

“What about holding on to India?”

“We are committed to the charter of the United Nations. We can't subjugate any people hereafter. There is no scope for colonialism. We have to liquidate the colonies and give them independence.”

“Suppose we postpone on some pretext.”

“No Mr. Viceroy. There is no chance. We depend upon America for rebuilding Britain. America is not in favor of colonialism in any form or manifestation. We have to release India.”

“The Yogi’s party is beating the trumpet that the British are running away from India, unable to face the wrath of Yogi and his party. They are telling the Indian masses that Yogi ousted the British from India.”

“Nonsense, the British are not afraid of Yogi’s men. They are not as weak as to run away from India. Britain has enough power to destroy the entire country. We are voluntarily relinquishing India in pursuit of our post-war policy but we will not let them sleep in peace. We give them sleepless nights for hundreds of years to come.”

“How is it possible?”

“Announce immediately that we are leaving India. Let the people decide what they want to do with their country. Be neutral and let the Hindus and the Muslims fight for the future of the country. Let them decide whether they should have one country for both or two separate countries. Sit and watch how they fight.”

“It is going to be a great spectacle to watch them fighting.”

“Finally we have encouraged Asghar to fight for the Muslim cause and the Muslims will form a separate state.”

“What does it matter to us?”

“They fight thousands of years in the name of religion and they will never be a power to reckon with. That is price they have to pay for demanding independence.”

“You are really great Mr. Secretary. You are a great diplomat too.”

William was sitting in the front chair at a press conference, as Yogi was about to address the journalists. He had come to India only a few days ago, and he was new to the country and its people. He searched for the company of a western journalist and found an amicable person in Annie, a British journalist who was observing proceedings as eagerly as William. He moved to a chair next to Annie and introduced himself.

“Hi, my name is William. I come from America.”

“My name is Annie, Annie Watson. I come from London. How are you doing?”

“I am doing fine. I am pleased to meet you, Annie. How long do you propose to stay in India?”

“I am here on a long-term assignment. I stay here for a pretty long period.”

“Great! Me too. I represent York Town Herald and you?”

“I represent Cleve Tribune.”

“Where are you put up?”

“I have checked into Taj Hotel.”

“Good, that is where I am staying. I think there are not many hotels which are not as convenient as Taj is.”

“We can check out anytime when we find a better accommodation, right?”

“Certainly, Look, Yogi is coming on to dais. It is custom here that everyone has to stand up when he comes in, as a mark of ovation.”

“India is still feudalistic and that is why these practices continue.”

“It is not only feudal but also colonial, you must know. It is a British colony and we British have trained them to respect the colonial lords too.”

William was not happy at her statement. He shot back.

“I know I know if America were a British colony, you would have treated us the same way. Our great leaders were smart to react early and nip the British colonialism in its bud.” Annie was surprised that he was so openly insulting the British within a British colony. By then Yogi entered in and sat in a chair on the dais, the entire place became silent. The organizer announced that Yogi was in a hurry as he was proceeding to Calcutta to pacify the Hindus who are being massacred by the Muslim mobs. He requested the journalists not to take much of his time. It was agreed that he would give two hours for the journalists. An Indian journalist stood up and shouted, ‘Yogi Ki’. All those who had assembled there shouted in one voice, ‘Jai’.

“What is it they are shouting?” William asked in great surprise?”

“They are showing respect to Yogi.”

“Oh, God, I thought they were protesting against him.”

“These people shout when they show respect. They also shout when they protest. It is difficult to understand them unless you know their language.”

“I ‘m told that the people of India are still much uncivilized and there are still people who live on trees. Is it true, Annie?”

Annie gave an admonishing look and said,

“Call me Ms. Watson. We are not close friends to call each other by first name as yet, okay. As for your enquiry, I must say that this is a strange country. There are quite a few people who are nearly as civilized as the British. There are many traditional people who are civilized, but still these Indians have a long way to go. A vast majority of the people of this colony is still poor, illiterate and rustic. Yogi himself has taken up the task of civilizing these people. He is asking his countrymen to get up from deep slumber and get abreast with the rest of the world. It is an uphill task for him.”

“Apart from poverty and illiteracy what other problems these people have?”

“There are so many problems with these people. They are superstitious and religious bigots. They think that the problems they are facing in their life are due to the sins committed by them in their previous birth. They are lazy and rely too much on their fate. One hundred years of our rule has changed only one percent of its population. It may take thousands of years to civilize these people. It is white man’s burden you know to civilize them. That is why we British were holding on to India. Now our government has decided to give independence to these people. God only knows how these people can safeguard their independence.

William asked Annie,

“Why do people respect Yogi everywhere?”

“Yogi ruled the hearts of the masses in India by his moral principles and personal sacrifices. The British could not fix him as a criminal or as a traitor. So, his supporters could take his name to win election. Ajay and Datta were as much patriots as Yogi was, but they made no attempt to stir up the masses, which Yogi did successfully and became a national leader, while others went unsung into oblivion.

One of the reporters asked Yogi,

“Bapuji, do you think the British had to surrender their power to the Indians because of your Satyagraha movement.”

“Certainly, I believe that the British guns became silent before our peaceful and non-violent Satyagraha.”

“Bullshit, the British gave freedom to most of its colonies even where there were no ‘Yogis’, not only to India.” Annie whispered

“Do you believe that if you had not entered the Indian political scene, India would not have got independence?”

“I have no comments to make.”

William asked Yogi,

“Mr. Yogi, was your Satyagraha always peaceful?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Then, why was it that every time you launched Satyagraha, it ended up in violence? The railway tracks were removed by the miscreants. Trains were derailed. The police were attacked and the police stations were set on fire. The British officers were killed. The police had to resort to lathi-charge and many a time, to firing.”

“Some Satyagrahis always went out of control and resorted to violence. Nobody could control mob, and not even me.”

“Do you think that it was difficult for the British to control the protesters by means of guns in their hands?”

“Not at all, they always had the upper hand.”

“Did you think the people were not ready for self rule?”

“Yes, I always thought so. The people must become educated and politically aware before they could retain and enjoy their independence. I always believe that economic independence should preclude political independence. I also feel that that the people should have social awareness and political consciousness before they get political freedom.”

“Don’t you think that the British decided to give independence because the British treasury had become bankrupt, and they thought that it would not be economically viable to hold on to overseas colonies including India?”

“That may be true. It was British government decision to leave India at the end of the Second World War. We have been demanding independence for the last thirty years but this decision surprised us.”

“Your dream was united India where both Muslims and the Hindus live together. Asghar has shattered your dream. Do you agree with me?”

“I have to agree with you. Asghar won and I lost. He got separate state for the Muslims.”

“Whom do you blame for the formation of Pakistan, the British or Asghar?”

“Both. It was a conspiracy to divide the country and keep alive tension in the region for years to come. The British must be very happy over their success.”

“You created anarchy in India and encouraged lawlessness in the country. Do you agree?” Annie asked.

“Yes, that is true. I am an anarchist. I have created lawlessness in the country because we wanted independence and not slavery. We have however accelerated the process of liquidation of the British Empire.” Yogi shot back.

“Do you know that India will pay heavily for its indiscipline and anarchy in the years to come?” William asked without any hesitation.

“We know that for sure. I always think that once we got independence we shall become law-abiding. The people should stop questioning the government and taking law into their own hands. It is my advice to the people that they should become law-abiding. Satyagraha is a tool to oust the foreigners from this country. It is wrong to wage Satyagraha against the lawfully established government,” explained Yogi.

“You are the national leader and it is your responsibility now.”

“I am a national leader, not the national leader. There are many national leaders now.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Sunil has assumed the leadership of this country and I am sure this country is safe in his hands.”

“But you and Sunil don’t see eye to eye.”

“But he has not fought with me either. He does not obey me but at least, he gives due consideration to it. He is the best of my followers.”

“He stopped implementing your orders long ago. He is doing what he feels right. He has let you down.”

“Everyone has let me down. I have gone down in my own eyes. The people have been violent. The leaders are self-seeking and they encourage people to turn violent to gain political mileage.”

“What solution do you offer to these problems?”

“They should dissolve my party and form a separate party to fight election in independent India. My party had a single mission, to free India from the clutches of the British. My mission has been achieved and the party has no other goal.”

“They have not only decided to fight elections under your party banners, but they have retained your party’s flag. Is it acceptable to you?” William pointed.

“Certainly not, Thousands of people have suddenly joined the party to get tickets for ensuing election.” Yogi alleged in great distress.

“You once told that the political murderers should not rule this country. Do you think these new entrants should rule India?”

“Never, these so called followers of mine will create caste-based, corrupt society which is against my principles.”

“What is your wish now?”

“I have lived too long. I want to die.”

The great souls of Yogi, Ajay and Datta met in heavens long after their death.

“Yogi, we congratulate you. You still seem to be a leader of India. We see your portraits and statues here and there.” Ajay greeted Yogi.

“It is very true. I am a leader but without a follower. The leaders use my name for securing votes and celebrate my birthday to capture mass support but they have smashed my dream of forming a highly moral, corruption-free society,” whined Yogi.

“My position is worse today. I have very few followers and majority of the Hindus have turned against themselves. It is a society divided against it self. It has lost its pride,” moaned Ajay’s soul.

“My own ‘so called’ friends turned foes and negated my influence on the people. Today I am totally forgotten. My portraits have been removed, and no politician mentions my name. If I had served God with half the zeal I served India, I would have found place at the feet of God,” Datta repented at leisure.”

“Look what is happening there. Some minister is standing over the statue of Ajay. He has around him some diggers. What are they doing there?”

“They are razing Ajay’s statue to the ground.”

“What is the minister saying, Yogi?”

“He is saying that Ajay was not a freedom fighter.”

“There is an interesting conversation going on. Let us listen. It is audible.” They listen to the conversation.

“What do you mean by a freedom fighter, Honorable Minister?” A journalist is asking the minister.

“A freedom fighter is one who fought against the British under the aegis of Yogi,” says the minister.

“Thousands of people fought independently of Yogi, are they not freedom fighters?” retorted the journalist.

“No, only Yogi and his men are freedom fighters,” the minister is asserting.”

“Don’t you think that Ajay and Datta are freedom fighters?” The journalist is countering him.

“They did not fight under the banner of Yogi. They are not freedom fighters,” ruled the minister. The people around the minister wondered how brilliant the minister was!

“But he clandestinely fought against the British and made valuable contribution to Indian Independence.”

“He gave an undertaking to the British that he will not fight against the British.”

“He gave an undertaking to the Colonial government not out of cowardice but out of expediency, as that was the only wise option that was

available to him to come out of prison and wage a clandestine war against the British,” The protestors are explaining to the minister.

“The minister is walking away turning deaf years to them,” observed Ajay in dismay and despair.

All three souls descended over the dust biting plaque and Yogi wrote an epitaph,

“Here lies the man who fought for the country only to die dishonored and unsung, and there rollicks a minister, praised and honored, for dishonoring a patriot. Long live India.”

THE END

Story Nine

War against the State

One day George found himself very miserable because his uncle had refused to finance his college studies. He was so distressed that he sat on the lawn in front of the library thinking of ending his life. Raghu observed his melancholic face and asked him,

“My dear friend, what are you worried about?”

“I must discontinue my studies, Raghu. My uncle refused to support me. I am a broke now. I may not return to this campus after the vacation. I shall drop out of the college and start working.”

“What did your father say?”

“My father died while I was young and my mother went to live with her brother along with me for she had no means of livelihood. My uncle brought me up and gave me education these fifteen years. The company for which my uncle worked announced yesterday that they had retrenched all 500 employees and closed the unit.”

“Don’t get upset. Don’t do anything foolish in haste. We have to think deeply on this matter.”

“Forget it. Do you think I can stay in Delhi without strong support? I need at least 120,000 to complete my degree course.”

“Where there is will there is way.”

“No way we can muster that much of money.”

“Let me think the matter over. I think I will find a solution to your problem. Bring two of your close friends or sympathizers to me. We will sit together and sketch a program of action. Good bye.”

Next day George met Raghu with two of his friends, Peer and Mir. All of them sat under a tree for discussion.

“We will go from house to house and collect donation,” suggested Peer.

“People won’t respond if you seek donation,” said Mir.

“He is right.” They all agreed

“I have a brilliant idea.” Raghu declared.

“Your ideas are always brilliant. Come out with it.”

“There was a gas leakage tragedy in Bhopal.”

“So?”

“So many people lost their life and thousands are still suffering from serious health problems.”

“So,”

“We will launch a strike tomorrow in the college in support of the victims. We will go round the city collecting huge amount in the form of donation.” Raghu suggested.

“The merchants won’t easily part with their money. We have to extort money from them by threat and intimidation.”

“It is punishable in law.” George admonished.

“I know but that is the quickest and surest way of collecting money for your education.” Raghu reminded.

“It is immoral and illegal.” George protested.

“End is good but means is bad. End justifies the means. That is what Kautilya said in his Arthashastra. It is Machiavellian but a wonderful idea. Get up and get busy,”

Raghu ruled and all the four agreed.

Next morning they formed a human chain in front of the college and prevented students from entering college. They asked the students to assemble in front of the college and gave a lecture on the gas tragedy and took out a procession to downtown demanding merchants to pay donation generously. They threatened to break glasses and loot shops if the shop owners refused to donate money and collected 100,000 in three hours. Not only Raghu and his men, but many unscrupulous students also took advantage of the situation and collected sizable sum of money for their studies with their own wallets in hand.

Raghu became a hero as the fellow students flocked round him the following day but the police zeroed on him. Raghu was returning from his college with George when he saw a horde of policemen led by Prem standing at the front gate. Fearing that he may stumble upon Prem who could be nasty, he started moving in the opposite direction to evade the police cordon. Prem sent two of his men to find him. They accosted him from behind and said,

“DSP is waiting for you at the front gate.” Raghu shivered in his shoes and asked,

“I have done no wrong. Why does he want to get me?”

“We don’t know. You must speak to him.”

Raghu turned to George and said,

“George, come with me. I apprehend trouble.”

“I am sure you are in trouble. I can’t forsake you now. Come on we shall go.” Both of them went to meet the DSP.

“Did you send words for me, sir?” Raghu asked politely.

“Yes, we have received complaint against you. Come with us to the police station.” He spoke gruffly.

“I have not done anything wrong.” Raghu protested.

“You may tell the court whatever you want to say. Come on we shall go now.” He held him by collar as hundreds of students looked on.

“Sir, don’t you recognize me? I am Daljit’s son. Daljit is a Member of the City Government.”

“I don’t know who Daljit is but I know who you are. I know you are a roadside Romeo who stalks girls on street. You organize illegal strike and intimidate merchants to pay money.”

George realized the gravity of the situation and went with him to the police station. When they reached the police station, DSP said,

“You are under arrest.”

“On what charge do you arrest me?”

“I arrest you on the charge of intimidation and extortion.”

“He collected money for a cause and the merchants paid voluntarily, sir.” George defended

“Will you keep quiet or shall I charge you as an accessory?” the police officer threatened him.

George sat mutely. Raghu said,

“Sir, I did not extort money. They paid on their own volition.”

“Sign here.” He produced the charge sheet.

“I won’t. I have not extorted any money.”

Two policemen caught hold of him and dragged him inside. Terrified, George ran out to inform Raghu’s father, Dalgit. Dalgit arrived there in an hour. He asked Prem furiously,

“I want to know on what ground you have arrested my son.”

“Oh, he is your son. You are proud to call him your son, right?”

“Yes, I am.”

Prem ordered his men to bring Raghu and they brought him. Raghu was bleeding in his nose. There were bruises all over his body.

“How dare you hit my son?” Dalgit shouted at the top of his voice.

“He extorted money from the general public. That is why he is here.”

“My son is a gentleman. He never does such things. We vouch for his innocence.”

“We have charge-sheeted him. Meet him in the court tomorrow at eleven.”

“Please don’t take him to the court. He is young and innocent. I will stand guarantee for his good behavior.” He requested gently.

“Take him in and produce him in the court tomorrow.” He ordered his men. They dragged him to a nearby cell.

“Please let him on bail. I will execute the bond.”

“No. No bail for him. He will be rotting here up to eleven tomorrow. You may go now.” Prem went away.

Next day Dalgit executed a bond in the court and brought him home. He was convalescing at home for the next fifteen days. The news of his arrest spread like a wild fire and the students staged a protest strike in the college next day under the leadership of George. There was street fighting between the students and the police until on the third day the District Magistrate gave ‘shoot at sight’ order and killed one of the students.

Three months later he was acquitted, as the police could not produce evidence in the court. Prem grimaced and vouched to book him again.

Raghu woke up from his bed on a sunshiny morning and sauntered round a nearby park talking to his jogging friends in great mirth. He looked relieved as the drowsy, dreary holidays had come to an end and his college had reopened after the summer vacation. It was his first day at the college as a final year student, and he wanted to show off to the new comers that he was one of those fortunate few students who owned a posh car and so, he decided to drive the car to the college that day. As he entered the college premises and pulled up his car in the parking lot, hundreds of less fortunate students looked at him, some admiringly and some grudgingly. He walked back to the gate, as was his wont, to survey all new girls entering the premises, one by one. It was very soothing to his mirthful eyes to see beautiful girls on lawn or in lounge. His eyes followed a young girl of eighteen, tall and lean, who he thought as an ideal beauty contest material. She gave him one quick glance and turned away. Though it was a quick glance, his photographic mind had already captured her image. He was so charmed by her looks that he stopped surveying other girls and followed her. She went to her classroom as he stood outside in the foyer and mentally made a note of her classroom. Next morning he followed the same process as assiduously as a researcher does in his laboratory. One day he gathered courage and waited to follow her in the evening. He felt he should speak to her but there was nothing in common between them and it was almost impossible to speak to her under the circumstances without incurring her wrath. He could not muster courage to speak to her but he decided to follow her to the bus stop to find an opportunity to talk to her. She walked for about two furlongs and stopped there waiting for a public bus, and he feigned as if he was there to board a bus. A bus came to a creaking halt emanating clouds of carbon monoxide sufficient to suffocate passersby; and she boarded the bus as his sharp mind quickly noted the route number. His eyes searched furtively for her last glimpse as the bus moved, but he was baffled when he saw her by the window watching his movement. He felt ashamed to let her know his weakness and briskly walked back with a determination not to follow her again. He thought that he should give her a better impression of himself. Next day he went and sat in his classroom without waiting for her at the gate. He did not follow her to the bus stop either. Another week passed by and he could not resist the temptation of seeing her any longer. He followed her pretending as if his presence there was a happenstance. As usual, she gave a quick glance and turned away without making any expression on her face.

One morning he woke up late and left for college at noon, as he had to take a test in Chemistry. On the way he met his best friend George, on whom he could rely upon. He decided to speak his mind to him.”

“George, I need your help badly.”

“What kind of help do you need? I am ready to do anything for you.”

“It is very simple. You must do a little bit of spying.”

“I love to do spying for you. Whom shall I spy upon?”

“Do you know Poonam?”

“Which Poonam you mean? You mean the girl you are crazy about.”

“How do you know that I am crazy about her?”

“Everybody knows that you look at her amorously. You can’t hide your love or hatred to anyone, for it will be written large on your face. You have completely changed since the reopening of the college. You have stopped talking to friends. You are inattentive in class. You have stopped going to library. You are running behind her every evening. It is quite usual for a man like you who would not take life seriously.”

“My friend, you are right. I have sleepless nights. I am not able to concentrate on my studies. I feel life is boring when I get home. My spirits are high when I see her around. I feel a kind of ecstasy in her presence and agony in her absence. I thought it was just a temporary phase, but day-by-day, I am longing to see and talk to her. I wish to speak out my mind to her.”

“Go ahead and do that.”

“I don’t personally know her. There is no one who can introduce me to her. I don’t know how to get close to her. I am gnawing within myself.”

“You are growing restless. I can understand that. What can I do for you?”

“She recognizes me, and so I don’t want to follow her to her house. She does not know you. So you can follow her up to her house and find out who she is and where she lives. Will you do me this favor?”

“Oh, yes, I can do that. I always wanted to be James Bond, 007. I will provide you with her bio-data by tomorrow evening, I assure you.” Raghu was relieved and felt ecstatic.

“Shall we go to a hotel and have some snacks?” Raghu offered.

“Oh, I am sorry I have no time. By the bye, you must know I don’t accept tips for my service. Thank you.” He teased him and went away.

Next evening, George followed her to the bus stand and got into the same bus by which she traveled and closely watched her movements. She moved towards the door a minute before the bus stopped. He got the inkling that she would alight, and so, when the bus stopped, he alighted from the bus behind her and pretending as if he was there on some work, walked along the pavement. After walking along the pavement some two hundred yards, she suddenly went into a protected and restricted area and walked on a gravel pathway to the residential quarter situated on the other side of the office complex. He skirted the compound wall all long not losing sight of her until she entered her house. The nameplate in front of the house was not bold enough to be read from a distance. It was written ‘P and something that he could not decipher. He felt elated at his successful expedition, and next evening he boastfully narrated his findings to Raghu. Pleased by his findings, Raghu thanked him profusely and parted.

One day he was waiting for a bus with his head bent, thinking of Poonam and suddenly, someone softly called him by name,

“Raghu”

Raghu got out of his reverie and raised his head. Poonam was standing before him smiling.

“Hi, how are you?” he asked her, resuming his composure.

“I am fine. Thank You,” she said but she could not find words to pursue her talk further. Both of them stood looking at each other, a little embarrassed, until she said,

“I didn’t see you for the last fifteen days. Were you out of town?” She talked without any hesitation then.

“No, I was very much in town but I was a little busy.” He lied, without seeing her face. She pretended to believe him but he felt that she did not. He felt ashamed of telling a blatant lie even before their friendship could take off.

“Where do you live?”

“I live in Karolbagh.”

“You are not very far from me. I live near Pusa Road.”

“Really”

“I told my uncle about you. My uncle says he will be delighted to meet you sometime.”

“In that case, I shall be pleased to meet him.”

“He is a very jolly person. It is a pleasure to be in his company.”

He did not know how to proceed with the conversation. He was a little baffled because she had talked about him to her uncle. He hopped into a bus that was about to leave, bidding good-bye to her while she waited for her bus unable to understand his weird behavior. Raghu peeked out when the bus came to a halt at another stop and saw George entering the bus. George found a vacant seat next to his and sat with him. When he was seated there, Raghu exclaimed,

“Hey, what a pleasant surprise it is!”

“In deed it is a great surprise,” agreed George.

“I need to talk to you regarding Poonam, and it is urgent.”

“What is the matter? You are looking worried. Have you been experiencing any new problem?”

“You guessed right, George. I am in a great predicament again”

“Explain.”

“I met Poonam a few minutes ago at the bus stop.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“No, she talked to me.”

“Now you are really in a mess.”

“Why do you think so, George?”

“She loves you. She will ask you to marry her. You are not ready for marriage but she is. I advise you to stay away from her otherwise you will be in deep trouble.”

“How do you know that she is ready for marriage? She just showed interest in me.”

“She is a respectable woman. She will not show interest in you unless she intends to marry you.”

“I know I am heading for trouble. I don’t think I will ever get out of this mess. I don’t know what I should do.”

“Stay away from her on some pretext until you are sure what you should do.”

That evening they were sauntering around the exhibition. They stopped to purchase ice cream in a corner shop when they noticed a police officer accompanied by two ladies, approaching them. George noticed that one of the ladies was Poonam. She was neatly dressed and there was radiance on her face.

“Look there, your friend, Poonam is coming here with her people,” pointed out George.

“You are right. It is she. Why is she coming with a police officer in uniform?”

“She will get you arrested for stalking. I don’t want to get mixed up. I take leave of you.” He said jocularly.

“Hey, look, it is the same police officer, Prem!” whispered Raghu as they approached.

The officer looked sternly at Raghu and George as he approached them and Poonam introduced them to her uncle Prem.

“Hi, meet my uncle, Prem. He is the District Superintendent of Police. He is on special deployment for apprehending criminals and terrorists operating in this area. Uncle, meet Mr. Raghu and Mr. George. They are studying in our college.”

“I am pleased to meet you.” Raghu said extending his hand to shake with his, but his hand was shaking, and his face had turned red. Prem hid his hand in his pocket and said with a grimace,

“Poonam is my niece. She says you are a very smart guy. She likes you a great deal. But I know you are a ‘Romeo’ and an extortionist. Did you forget your tryst with me on the previous occasion? Stay away from Poonam or else I will break your ribs” He turned to Poonam and said curtly,

“Shall we make a move, Poonam?”

“Uncle, Raghu is a nice gentleman. He is loved and respected by all in our college. You have mistaken him.”

“There is no mistake on my part. I had law on him once. I know he is a criminal. Come on, we shall go.”

She ignored his remarks, turned back and said, waving at them,

“Okay guys see you tomorrow in the college. Good bye till then.”

Raghu and George heaved a sigh of relief when they were gone. They were feeling so embarrassed that they decided to get out of the place at once. In about ten minutes, they were at the bus stand.

That night Prem was having a long conversation with his elder brother Randhir of Sitapur on phone.

“Hello my dear brother, how are you doing?”

“I am fine. How is everybody home?”

“Something has gone wrong. Your daughter is in love with a boy called Raghu. He is on our police records. I bet he will soon head a gang and run a mafia. He is courting Poonam and she is falling for him. What shall I do now?”

“Does he know you are a cop?”

“He knows what I am. I had already booked a case against him. If I get another opportunity I will fix him so that he will not escape punishment.”

“I don’t want to take chances. You admit her to some other college. That wretched should not see her face again. You tell Poonam that if she talked to him or told him her whereabouts she will be sent back to Sitapur; and she will have to drop out of the college.”

“You spoke my mind. That is what I am going to do.” He hung up.

Raghu wanted to explain her how he was entangled in an extortion case. He was also inquisitive to know what she feels about him after her uncle had maligned him. He followed her to the bus stop to find a right time to talk to her as Poonam was busy talking to her classmate, Ria, on their way to bus stop. She did not realize that Raghu was closely following them. During the course of his pursuit, he overheard the conversation between them.

“Poonam, Amar visited our place. He has come down from Calcutta for a short stay.” Her friend broke the news.

“Oh, really, it is very nice of him. I wish he had visited our place too.” Poonam expressed her disappointment.

“He wanted to visit your place too but expressed his inability for lack of time.” Ria said in his support.

“When will he visit this place next?” Poonam asked anxiously

“He did not talk about it. He was saying that it was very hard to get time for vacation.” Ria said and observed that Poonam’s face had turned crimson.

“He would not have visited your house without purpose. There should be something more to his visit than meets the eye. Won’t you tell me why?” Poonam looked furtively at her and asked abruptly.

“Did he propose to you?”

“No, he did not. I wouldn’t marry anyone until I complete my studies.” Ria was trying to hide her disappointment

“Would your answer have been the same if he had really proposed to you?” Poonam asked, intently looking into her face. Ria was really cornered and her eyes became wet. Poonam understood the seriousness of the situation and became silent without demanding an answer. When they were at the bus stop, the bus had already arrived. They boarded the bus hurriedly before it moved. Raghu thought,

‘By her talk I am sure she deems it a privilege if Amar had visited her house. She appears to have great liking and respect for him. I wonder if she is in love with him.’ Next moment he reconsidered, “I am imagining too much. I am stupid.”

That night he was awake till early morning in his bed, thinking of Poonam. He said aside, “She appears to be a well-bred fine girl, the kind of girl I would love. Am I already in love with her? How can I love a girl whom I hardly know? Anyway, it is true that I like her and I shall find out more about her love life.” He fell fast asleep at five in the morning but he was awakened by jerk due to a bad dream. Prem had appeared in his dream wielding pistol. He is a nightmare for me, he thought. ‘The best way to escape from Prem is to forget Poonam once and for all.’ He said to himself and made no attempt to meet her.

After thinking for a day, he said to himself reversing his earlier decision,

“I am really in love with her. I shall marry her if she agrees. Will Prem let me marry her? He is surely an obstacle in my way but he cannot

deter me from marrying her. I will talk to her father and convince him.” He gathered courage and went to the bus stop to speak his mind but she was not there. Next morning he stood at the college gate to have a glimpse of her but he did not see her. He went to her classroom on the pretext of meeting someone and looked for her but she was not there. He went to the bus stop and waited for her but in vain. Three months lapsed, and he was sure that she had left the college. He sent George to see if she lives there where she lived earlier and he returned with the news that the nameplate in front of the house had been removed. He was raving mad and roaming round the city for a few days, but gradually became sober and started taking interest in studies and mixing with his friends.

Somewhere across the border, Abdul, the principal of a secret organization, was addressing his agents in an emergency meeting.

“Gentlemen, India helped East Pakistan to break away from Pakistan to form a separate state. In retaliation, we have decided to disintegrate India. I assure you that we will not rest until that country is disintegrated. It is our promise. All our efforts will be geared to this end from now on.”

“How are we going to achieve this impossible task?” Aziz, an undercover designate to India asked inquisitively. Abdul ignored his interruption and proceeded to address,

“We are going to make Pakistan strong and invincible, and strike at India at its vulnerable point. That is our mission, not merely our policy.”

“Which is that vulnerable point that will enable us to accomplish this Herculean task?” He demanded to know.

“We play our old card which we played while partitioning India and carving out Pakistan.” Abdul said, alluding to his familiar tactics.

“We understand what you mean, divide and rule.” Aziz laughed

“You guessed right. We set up one community against another and annex a part of India” Abdul averred.

“It is a brilliant idea. We will catch hold of the disgruntled elements in these areas and play our political game.” Aziz laughed, expressing his satisfaction

“Wonderful,” said other members in appreciation.

“You may disperse now,” said Abdul. All the agents started leaving the room.

“Aziz, Stay back. I have to talk to you.”

When they were closeted in his antechamber, Abdul said,

“Look, you can make use of the hotel run by a Habib, our man in Delhi. The hotel is situated near the Cannought Place or some other place. That will be the nerve center of your activity. Nobody will suspect you if you choose to stay there because he works ostensibly for a political party and enjoys lot of political clout in the corridors of power. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Certainly, we have thousands of such ‘Pakistan patriots’ in India.” Both of them laughed to their heart content.

“He is our contact person and provides logistics for your activities.” Abdul said.

“Great! When shall I leave for Delhi?”

“You have to leave tonight. You may collect your visa and passport. You are going there as an attaché. Okay?”

“I am ready to go. I am ready to die for my country.”

“We want you to live for your country. Good luck and good bye.”

Aziz walked out of the building thinking of the task ahead and reported to Habib at Delhi in his restaurant. Habib greeted Aziz and promised to provide logistics for his clandestine operations.

He organized a great Id party within fifteen days, and invited political leaders and all bigwigs of a particular community at the instance of Aziz. Guru and Rana were special guests of honor because they were great leaders of the community. The party was a grand success because it opened up an immense opportunity for Aziz to interact with them. He gradually gained their confidence by his wit and cleverness, and drew them to a conversation on a special occasion.

“Guru, we are sorry for your community which played such a significant role in India’s independence but got nothing in return. In my opinion, your government did not adequately compensate your community for the extra-ordinary role played by your people.”

“You are wrong, Mr. Aziz. We are a very happy and satisfied lot. We still vividly remember how we were massacred in Pakistan in pre-independence period; and how, to avoid death and destruction, most of our community members converted themselves to Islamic faith at the point of sword. There is no religious persecution of any sort here. We are highly respected here as great patriots of India. We hold prestigious positions in Civil Services and Armed Forces. We have no grouse whatsoever.”

“But I don’t agree with you, Mr. Guru, said Rana, “We have made wonderful contribution to this country but we got nothing in return. We are treated like any other citizen and in my opinion; we must get a better deal.”

“There you are, Mr. Rana. You know the crux of the problem. I agree with you. Your community really deserves a better deal for the contribution it has made to this country” Aziz interposed.

“We are a nation based on equality and liberty. No one has any privileged position. It is rightly so. We have no cause for any complaint.” Guru said in defense.

“But I think we have a grouse, Guru,” Rana said interrupting Guru,

“I dreamt of great economic and political strides in our areas, and expected the marked development of our community. We are not satisfied with the snail paced progress.”

“Tell me, Gentlemen, if you wouldn’t have progressed faster if your community had a separate state of its own.” Aziz rubbed a bit of salt.

“We are very intelligent and industrious. If we had a separate state, we would have made great strides in every walk of life, and there is no doubt about it.”

“Why don’t you start a movement for a separate State,” Aziz suggested, fanning the fire.

“It is disastrous to India and for our community, both,” said Guru emphatically.

“Guru, you always take a very limited view of things. Think of your community and the progress it can make as a separate state under your able and farsighted leadership.”

“India is a great country. It is going to play marvelous role in Asia and in the world in the years to come. We glory in the glory of India. We want to be a part of India for all times to come,” declared Guru.

“Don’t tell me, Guru, that you can’t make progress without being a part of India. Nepal is not a part of India. Burma is independent. There are many small countries in the world, which are independent and thriving. Singapore is a city state but it is thriving much better than India.” Aziz argued.

Guru stood up, agitated by Rana’s stance and Aziz’s cunningness, and said,

“I have to go home. It is already Eleven O’clock in the night.”

“Please sit down, Guru. We are in the midst of an interesting conversation.” Rana said.

“It is late. I must go now. Rana, Come on, we shall go,” Guru persuaded him. Rana was more interested in the discussion, and did not want to stop discussion at that. He looked into the face of Guru and surveyed his mood before deciding to call it a day.

“Yes, it is late and we must be going now,” said Rana as he got up rather unwillingly. Aziz studied the situation and wisely let them go. When they left the hotel, Aziz gave a sardonic laugh that sent people outside the room to louder laughter but they did not know why he laughed.

Rana and Guru walked silently to their car. When they were in the car, Guru sat behind the wheels and Rana, next to him.

“Aziz is talking of impossibility. He is creating confusion in our mind. I see some kind of conspiracy behind his talk, Rana.”

“You always look through the colored glass Guru. You suspect foul play behind every talk. You look always through jaundiced eyes. It is not fair.”

“You are too naïve Rana. You believe everybody without suspecting their motive.”

“What motive can Aziz have? He is also a citizen like we are. He sees something that we don’t see. He has greater vision than we have. He has provided a food for thought, and we have to think deeply about it.”

“I see some kind of conspiracy behind his move. I don’t trust him. How do you know that he is a citizen of India? Many outsiders have illegally entered our country for destabilizing it”

“Alright Guru, we will agree to disagree, okay. I will talk with my other friends before I drop this matter, Okay?”

“Do whatever you want. I am not in it,” said Guru as he entered the main road. Rana did not speak. His mind was preoccupied, and there was silence until the car was pulled up before Rana’s house. Rana went home in pensive mood, but he did not forget to bid good-bye to Guru.”

Next evening Rana went to meet Aziz alone to pursue the matter. Aziz welcomed Rana with a hug and Rana felt he had become a great leader overnight. Aziz asked Rana,

“Rana, did you think of my plan further? I had still so much to say yesterday night, but Guru did not let me talk out my mind. I wished you had met me today for a detailed discussion on this matter. Good, you are here. God is great He has directed you to me.”

“You are right, Aziz, we must have further discussion on this matter. We have to frame a time bound plan and a good strategy. You have a computer brain and we need your guidance.”

“I am honored that I have an opportunity to work for the head of a ‘to be born state’.”

“I don’t understand why you call me the head of a ‘to be state’.”

“You are a great leader of your community. There is not a single man who can oppose you. Everybody has great confidence in you. So a separate State is a certainty now.”

“You are fixing a great responsibility on me. It is not so easy to form a separate State. Our community has to accept it and aspire for it. It needs a lot of campaigning.”

“We advance as much money as you want. Tell me how much money you need for campaigning, equipments, arms and ammunitions, for raising a mercenary and salary for the workers.”

“It needs several billons.”

“Don’t worry we can finance you. We will finance you on one condition. You should not ask the source from which we finance.

Secondly, you should also help us in finding different sources of financing for our ongoing campaign.”

“You are a great man Aziz. You are Godsend. You are the savior of our community. Don’t feel bad that Guru is not well disposed to your plan. If he does not help you, I will. We will not include Guru in our campaign. Okay.”

“Don’t tell anyone that I am the moving and motivating force behind this campaign. Officially it is your campaign and you are the campaign leader. After all you are going to rule the new State.”

“Don’t flatter me too much. I already feel that I am the head of state.”

“You will be the head of state. We will meet again on Saturday.

One day, Dalgit came home early, and he was in great spirits. His wife asked him,

“You are very delighted today. Have you brought any good news?”

“You have read my mind quickly. I am in good mood today because Rana has proposed his daughter Manjita to Raghu.”

“What is so great about it? Rana will never get a better suitor for his daughter. But my son is just 21 years old and he is too young to marry.”

“I have received information that he is courting a girl in the college premises and he is in love with that girl. Do you know who that girl is? She is the daughter of our sworn enemy Randhir.”

“It is really a bad news. We shall prevent him from marrying that girl. I will tell him in no uncertain terms that we don’t agree to that marriage but I don’t understand why you want to see him married to Rana’s daughter?”

“He is a very rich man and has offered two hundred thousand in cash by way of dowry. I am sure he celebrates his daughter’s marriage in a grand manner.”

“But will Raghu agree to marry her?”

“Why will he not? She has a fair complexion. She has studied up to her tenth grade.”

“No, he will not okay this proposal, I am sure. She is not good looking.”

“He has to agree to this marriage. I have given him my word and I have to keep it up.”

“He won’t care if you give your words to Rana. He has not made any promise. He will marry a girl of his choice. We will not force him into a marriage he does not accept.”

“What is wrong in marrying Rana’s daughter?”

“Rana is working against the government. He has joined separatist movement. He will be in deep trouble very soon. We are already seeing many police sleuths and military spies hanging around our street. We don’t want trouble.”

“Even I am with the separatists, so what?”

“Don’t talk loudly; the police are around the corner.”

“I don’t care. I have not done anything wrong. They cannot touch me.”

“Okay, don’t raise your voice. Raghu is coming down the stairs.”

“Raghu, come here. I have something to tell you.”

“What is it, Papa?”

“You know Rana. He proposed his daughter to you. I know you agree to this marriage. I gave him my word. You must not let me down, Son, I know you won’t”

“Papa, you are impossible. Without my approval how could you give word to him?”

“Well, I am the head of the family. Whose permission do I need?² I have to take decision in the interest of my family.”

“How do you say that marrying Rana’s daughter is in the interest of our family? What is so special about her?”

“Raghu, Rana is a rich man. He pays two hundred thousand in dowry. It is also an exchange marriage. My daughter will become the daughter-in-law of Rana. Govinda, his son, has already agreed to marry

your sister, Amrita. But Rana says that he agrees to this marriage only if you agree to marry his daughter, Manjta.”

“Papa, I have no objection to Govinda, the son of Rana, marrying Amrita but I cannot marry Manjita.”

“You have to marry her. She is fair complexioned and well accomplished in household work.”

“She has squint eye. She is a dwarf. I don’t marry her.”

“But I have given my word. You must honor my word.”

“I am sorry, I can’t. He is working against Government.”

“Raghu I know you have fallen in love with a girl in the college. I will never let you marry that girl.”

He walked out of the house in rage at his father’s indiscreet obstinacy.

“You better tell Rana that it is impossible to convince your son.” His mother suggested.

Dalgit sat there disturbed, not knowing how to handle the situation.

Dalgit and Raghu sat in the quadrangle of their house talking of separatist movement with Govinda, Rana’s son who had come there to hide in their attic after blasting a bridge disrupting military supplies in the region. Amrita and her mother sat a little farther knitting sweaters.

“Govinda, you are doing a great disservice to the nation by joining hands with our enemies. You will be soon branded a traitor and the police will hunt you down.”

“I am doing a great service to my country ‘to be born’. I don’t consider this as my country and I will not owe allegiance to it.”

“India is our country. Believe me. We have no other country to call our own. It is indiscreet to fight India.”

“That is your opinion. You have every right to hold any opinion you think right. Don’t try to change my opinion. I will not listen to anyone of you.”

“Look at Amrita. She loves you so much. Why don’t you leave politics and marry her and live a happy married life?”

“No, Raghu, I fight for a separate state and die fighting.”

“What will become of Amrita?”

“If I die she will marry someone else and live happily. If I live I will marry when the campaign is over.”

They heard heavy footsteps at the door. Govinda moved into the back yard of the house, opened the postern door, and peeped out to ensure that there was no soldier watching him and then, slipped out of the house and disappeared when no one was there.

Govinda was the only son of Rana, and he was in love with Raghu’s sister, Amrita. Rana had agreed to their marriage on the condition that Raghu marries Manjita, his daughter. Raghu did not want to marry Manjita because he did not like her brother’s association with the separatist groups and their terrorist activities. Dalgit, Raghu’s father, was a sympathizer of the separatist movement but he himself was not involved in it. His soft corner for Govinda enabled him to take shelter in their attic. The police led by Prem, having got an inkling of his involvement were combing the area. The streets were empty and the people had preferred to stay in.

Suddenly there was heavy knocking at the door and Simran, Raghu’s mother, opened the door and five cops rushed in, led by Prem, pointing guns at the inmates. The girls ran behind the men-folk. One of the soldiers searched the entire house while others stood pointing guns at them. He came down from the garret, saying,

“Sir, he has escaped. I don’t find him here.”

“Where is Govinda?” shouted Prem at Raghu.

“We don’t know where he is. He has not come here for several days.” Raghu replied softly.

“Tell us his hiding or else we kill every one of you.” Prem pointed gun at Raghu

“We really don’t know. He must have left the town.” Dalgit said in defense of Raghu

One of the soldiers came up to him and hit him on his back with the rifle, and asked,

“Tell the truth or else we will kill you.”

“You may if you want, but the truth is he is not here,” asserted Dalgit.

“You guys don’t listen to us. You have no respect for law and order. You are on to disintegrate our country. We will teach a lesson you will never forget.” Prem pounced on Amrita, caught her by her arm and started dragging her out of the house.”

“Don’t do any harm to my sister, Officer. We are law abiding, and never did anything unlawful.” Raghu conjured.

The girl screamed, wriggled and wretched to escape from the clutches of the soldier but she could not. Raghu in a swift move reached Prem and tried to prevent him from dragging the girl away. Two cops came upon Raghu and forcefully held him back as the third cop dragged the girl out of the house. His father shouted at Prem while his mother fell to his feet and begged for her release. Prem kicked her with the heavy shoes and pulled the trigger at his father, which wounded him instantaneously. He fell to the ground and groaned in agony as others stood horrified with eyes wide open and in subdued silence. The cops threw Raghu on to the floor after tying his hands and legs by a rope and left them bolting the door from outside.

“You rascals, you dare to touch my sister. I will blow up your police station. It is my promise.” Raghu shouted at Prem.

“I will lock you up and give you aero plane treatment when we get some evidence on hand.” Prem shouted back and kicked Raghu in his stomach before leaving and went to his van. He found Amrita wriggling and crying for help as two cops had pinned her down to the floor of the van. He gave a sardonic laugh as he sat behind the wheel and drove away. As soon as they left the spot, the neighbors rushed into the house and released Raghu and rushed his father to the hospital.

Next morning a cowherd who was walking along the tank bund noticed the body of a girl. He went round the town and told the people he came across that a girl has been murdered; and her body was lying bare. The news spread like a wild fire and hundreds of people went to the tank bund to see the gruesome murder of a teenage girl and saw the body lying bare with bloodstains on her body. Raghu and Rana ran to the spot and identified the body of Amrita.

‘The Police have raped her before killing’, exclaimed Raghu and vowed to wreak vengeance. The police came there in half an hour and after the necessary formalities, removed the body to the post-mortem. All the members of the family narrated to the police the ghostly incident that happened the previous day; but the police did not take cognizance. They said, ‘let us wait for the post-mortem report’. That evening Raghu and his friends went to the Police Station to claim the body. The officer at the desk said in monotone,

“The autopsy report says she has committed suicide.”

“No,” Raghu retorted. “It is wrong. She was in high spirits till the police moved her away to the nearby fields. They forcefully removed her to the fields and gang raped her before killing.”

Prem came out and shouted at Raghu,

“Look, nobody touched your sister. The autopsy report says she died of consuming poison. There was no evidence of rape as alleged by you. You are making false allegation against my staff. I must register a case against you.” He registered a case against him on several counts and let him go.

There was nothing he could do. He wrote several petitions to the head of the police but there was no reply. “She was a victim of brutal sexual assault by five police officers,” he cried, but there was no one to support them. Raghu became disgusted with the police atrocities and lost faith in the system and vouched to support the separatist movement. He confided to Rana his willingness to join the campaign, which Rana wholeheartedly appreciated and directed him to Aziz.

It was ten O’ clock at night; and the Cannought Place was becoming empty and there was seemly no activity in the middle wing alley. Raghu stopped his motorcycle in a parking lot and slowly moved along the alley with great circumspection to make sure that nobody noticed his presence there at that hour. He suddenly entered into a building where a dim light was burning in the second floor. He reached the second floor of the building and knocked at the door with his knuckles three times, and the door opened slowly. A middle-aged man with sharp features and robust build called him in and closed the door. He led him to the antechamber

where a young man in his thirties was sitting on a swiveling chair behind a table.

“I hope nobody noticed your movements.”

“I assure you nobody did.”

“Come on in and sit down. Rana gave me your address and phone number. He told me that your father was wounded in the police hold up and your sister was assaulted and murdered mercilessly, and you want to join the separatist movement to wreak vengeance against the police and the state.”

“I was always opposed to the idea of launching a separatist movement but the way these cops behave, I mean misbehave, and their cruelty and ruthlessness have forced me to take up cudgel against them. They gang-raped my sister and killed her but I could not legally fix them. In such a society the recourse could only be guerilla tactics.

“I have a job for you but of course if you could satisfy certain requirements.”

“I hope I can fulfill your requirements.”

“Are you ready to do any kind of job?”

“Of course I am”

“Do you have any police record?”

“Yes, Prem booked me once for extortion out of malice but I proved in court that that I am clean. So far I have been an honest citizen.”

“That is why you have been suffering so much.”

“What do you mean?”

“Honesty, honor, patriotism are all high sounding words that do not take you anywhere. This world is for those who want to live a life of vices at the cost of these virtues. I mean you have to choose between luxury and honesty. They don't go together.”

“I was honest so far but got nothing but misery and so, I don't care what I do but I must need a life worth living.”

“Good, we need people like you.”

“But you did not tell me what the job is about?”

“Aziz will tell you what your assignment is. You have to swear that you will be loyal to us.”

“I have no hesitation to swear. I will.”

He called in Aziz and said to him,

“Here is our new recruit. He is ready to take oath. You can administer oath and inform him of his assignment.” He turned to Raghu and said,

“Aziz is your boss. You will receive orders from him. Remember once you join our organization, you cannot leave it.”

Aziz called Raghu to the next room for further discussion that lasted two hours.”

“Our organization has a mission.”

“What is its mission?”

“Our mission is to disintegrate India. Are you with us?”

“I don’t think that I want to be a traitor. I want to wreak vengeance against the cops and the state that has created lawlessness in the country.”

“You can’t achieve your goal single-handed. You need an organization, money and men to materialize your goal. That is where we come into picture.”

“That is very true. I need the support of your organization. That is why you have decided to become a part of this organization but I have a question.”

“You are welcome to ask any question. We have satisfactory answers for all your questions.”

“How much money is there in it?”

“There is a hundred thousand dollars-American dollars. Are you happy?”

“Quite. I am excited, but at the same time I am worried.”

“Why should you be worried when you get so much of money? You will be safely sent to America and you will live a comfortable life. Thousands of people throng around the American consulate for visa and go back disappointed. We take care of your easy passage to America.”

“I am not sure that I want to be a fugitive leaving behind the near and dear ones.”

“The choice is yours. The stake is so high that you will never be able to earn by honest means. But remember that once you enter this dragon like chakravayuha, you will never be able to get out. You will have to cut off with your past life and start a new life all over again.”

“Can’t I visit my friends and relatives?”

“You may have to leave your country at a short notice and you may never return.”

“I will come back tomorrow to convey my decision.”

“No, once you go out you can’t re-enter this place. It is closed for you forever. In the first place they won’t let you leave this place.” He gestured to two men who were waiting at the door.

Raghu was taken aback that he was already trapped but he had no regrets. He only hesitated to go-ahead to do a job he really did not like to do.

“In that case I have no choice but to accept the job. I say ‘yes’”

“You will be attached to Rana who will be your group leader. You work for us under his guidance. He pays you 10000 every fortnight until you execute assignments, and once you execute assignments, off you go to America. Khuda Hafiz.”

He was pleased that he had to work with Rana. Rana was waiting in another room and Raghu went to see him. He hugged Raghu and offered him a seat.

“Raghu, I know you always detested this kind of job. It is the wound in your heart that has prompted you to accept this assignment. I also deeply grieve the dastardly attack on your sister and we together work for the demise of the scoundrel who mercilessly killed Amrita.”

“Rana, we have one goal and we pursue it.” He hugged Rana and Rana reciprocated by patting on his back.

Rana drew him into conversation during the course of which Rana gave him a secret assignment and said you can ask for as much money as you want for completing this job. Your job is to work for me. You will be my chief campaigner. We will meet here on Saturday at ten in the night. Bye.

“Khuda Hafiz” Raghu said as he shook hands with Rana. When he came out of the antechamber, the hotel was still open and there were about twenty people, all weird looking people.

Raghu came out of the building, warily watching people on the road. When he was sure that no one was watching him, he sat on his motorbike

and rode away without light until he reached the corner of the road, and he turned on the lights when he was on the main Road. He reached home at one in the morning and went straight into his bed where he was lying till next noon.

Aziz telephoned to Rana and told him,

“We will find another one hundred volunteers like Raghu to work with you. You will meet them when you come here Saturday night. Good night.”

“Thank you Aziz you have simplified my task and I thank you for that, but we need lot of money for running a secret organization. If you stop supporting us, we will be at sea.”

“Don’t worry Rana money will flow like water. Take care, Rana. Bye.”

Saturday evening, Rana climbed up the flight of stairs with great circumspection and met Habib and Aziz who were already in the hotel awaiting his arrival. They went to the antechamber and settled down for a serious discussion.

“Rana, how do you propose to start this campaign? We are inquisitive to know about it?”

“You should be anxious, I know. I am more anxious to tell you what I propose to do. It is going to be a great political movement. A huge sum of money has to be spent, and a large number of men should be involved in this campaign if it has to succeed. We have planned perfectly after carefully weighing every aspect of it, as we cannot take chances. We have to start this movement at the grass-root level and build up a hierarchy up to state level. I will send my emissaries to the nook and corner of our province. They meet the local leaders and those who agree with our goal will be invited to the capital for a secret meeting.”

“You have a wonderful idea. We know that you are a great leader with great vision. There is no doubt that this campaign is going to be a grand success.” Aziz flattered Rana to keep his spirit high.

“Of course, if God’s willing.” Rana said placidly in an air of confidence

A janitor announced that Raghu was waiting outside. Aziz asked him to send him in. Raghu came in and joined them. Rana and Raghu hugged each other in silence.

“Did anyone notice your movement?” Aziz asked Raghu

“Not at all, I doubly made sure that none noticed me getting into this building.”

“Did you tell anyone in the house that you are coming here?” Rana asked.

“No, nobody knows where I am at this point of time.” Raghu assured them

“That is really great. Raghu, thank Rana. He has accepted you as the Chief campaigner.”

“Sure. I need him as my chief campaigner as I find in him the required traits and personality, young blood and great zeal. “

“Hereafter we will meet here once a week; or whenever the emergency arises. Start working from tomorrow. We release 5,000,000 immediately.” Aziz said looking furtively at Habib.

Aziz went to another room and he came back with wads of 100 Rupee bills and a brief case. Raghu who had never seen so much money in his lifetime arranged the wads of notes neatly in the brief case before he got ready to leave.”

“Shall we take leave of you now?” Both Rana and Raghu stood up, in a state of excitement.

“Good luck. Good luck to you both. Watch out for the unexpected.” Aziz said cryptically. Both of them left the place but not together.

Raghu crossed the road carefully, holding his brief case close to his chest with both hands. He placed the brief in his front basket and started his motorcycle.

Next morning Raghu appeared a different man. He was no longer a young man who would waste his time in frolic and frivolity. His mind started showing maturity and sense of purpose. He was more determined than ever to do something adventurous and show to others he was capable of turning out wonders. He contacted an automobile agent and bought a

good, used Premier car for his use. When he finished all formalities connected to car buying, he came home, told his family members that he got the job of an operator in a detective Agency, which involves lot of touring from place to place. They were very happy and relieved. He changed his stance from that of a kindhearted, refined young man to one of a hardened criminal, whose mind could only think of rifles, pistols and hand grenades. He wished he could kill people who came in his way, unmindful of the consequences.

He traveled five villages a day and convened meetings of the village elders to discuss the matter. He managed the affairs so adroitly that he would invite only those people who were in favor of a separate state to a secret meeting that was scheduled for the succeeding month, without leaving any clue of his strategy to the people who were not in favor of a separate state. On one such sortie, He went to meet one, Randhir, a prominent member of an area that was situated in the outskirts of the city. When he knocked at his door, a beautiful girl of medium-build opened the door. Their eyes met; and they stood there looking into each other's face for a few seconds astounded before she broke silence.

“Raghu, what a pleasant surprise it is? Come on in.” It was Poonam.

“Believe me, I didn't expect you here. I came in search of your father, Randhir.”

“He has gone to fields, but he is expected to reach home any moment. Come in and be seated.” She said. He walked into the foyer and sat on a chair, looking at the numerous photos hung on the wall. She came out to the foyer and asked him,

“Shall I prepare some tea for you?”

“Oh, no, thanks.”

“I will serve you lunch with Papa.”

“I am fine. I am not hungry.”

“You have to eat something. You came to our house for the first time; and I wouldn't send you back in empty stomach. Papa will never send his guests without offering food. It is already three in the afternoon, and you must be hungry and tired.” She said in a soft tone. Raghu was really hungry and tired. He gave a quick glance, nodded his head in appreciation and said,

“Thank you. I will eat lunch with your father.”

“That is cool.” She said and went in. She appeared a few minutes later again and asked,

“Does Papa know you?”

“No he doesn’t. I am coming to this part of the district for the first time. I never had an occasion to visit this area. Now that I know you, I may visit again if you invite me to come back.” He looked at her anxiously for an answer.”

“You must come back. Papa is fond of meeting people.” She replied shyly. There was a knocking at the door and Randhir came in, as the door was not bolted. Raghu touched his feet saying,

“I am Raghu. Rana sent me to you. It seems he knows you for a long time.”

“Sit down. I know Rana from his childhood. How are you? Are you any of his brother or relative?”

“I work for Rana’s party. I am a party worker. He has sent me to seek your help in organizing a meeting of elders.”

“Rana wants to know if the people of this locality aspire for an independent state. He wants to take up the matter with higher officials and to the legislature. I have come here to organize a meeting to ascertain the views of the people. I am new to this part of the district and I need your help in organizing this meeting.”

“If Rana needs our help, we will gladly help him.”

Poonam reappeared and announced,

“Papa, lunch is ready. Call your guest also.”

“Yes, I will. He is our guest and I need to invite him for lunch.” He assured her, and said to Raghu,

“You have a rare occasion to taste delicious food prepared by my dear daughter, Poonam.” Raghu followed him to the dining room. Poonam served with great interest and he enjoyed her amorous looks and coquetry through out. When the lunch was over, Randhir said,

“I go and arrange for the meeting at three-thirty. You take rest until I send words for you.” He went away leaving him in the house.

“Rest for a while.” Poonam said and stood there for a while,

“I don’t need any rest. I may have to leave any moment.”

“What is your father doing for his living?”

“He is actively involved in Politics”

“My Papa must know him then.”

“Why do you think so?”

“He is also deeply involved in Politics.”

“Who else stays with you in the house?”

“My father and mother and me, all of us live together.”

“O I see, you are not married yet,” she exclaimed. There was a sigh of relief in her tone. He ogled at her and she bent down her head shyly.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“My father, my step mother and I stay in this house. I am the only child born to my parents. My mother died of cancer when I was young. He married another woman who was a cook in this house. My stepmother spends most of her time with her mother in the neighboring town. When she is here she is always vociferous. Many a time I will have to stay alone in the house.”

“All these months, I was roaming mad in anticipation of finding you some day.”

“I left that college suddenly because my uncle was allotted another large official quarters in another part of the city next to D.K. College. I obtained my degree in Arts through D K College, last year. I am sitting idly at home now. You know idle mind is a devil’s workshop. This is a small town on the outskirts, and I can’t move around freely. I have to stay within the four walls of this house.”

“I am very sorry that you are not quite happy in your present situation. Everything will be alright soon.” He consoled her, alluding to something that she could vaguely understand, but she was not so sure of what he was talking. Somebody knocked at the door and Poonam opened the door. The messenger informed that a meeting has been arranged at the village hall and Raghu has been invited to address the meeting. Instinctively, Raghu drew close to her and held her hands and she rested her head on his bosom for a minute and then she withdrew to a distance.

“When do you propose to come back here?” She asked earnestly

“I will find time to call on you again. Good bye.” He said and started moving out. She came behind him and stood at the doorway. There was

agony in her eyes-the agony of separation of a beloved one.” He suddenly turned back, smiled, and gave one longing lingering look behind and he was gone. An unknown bondage of love attracted them to each other and they felt the pang of agony in separation. That evening her father came home by seven alone. She expected him to say something about Raghu, but he said nothing and she was longing to hear about him, day after day.

“After all, he was a visitor and he may never come back again,” she thought at first, but subsequently, she said to herself, “one day he will knock at our door. This world is strange. We meet people when we don’t expect them but we may not meet people we long to meet. Papa will never understand what I am going through. Only Mom would have understood my feelings now had she been alive, but she is not alive to help me.” She felt like weeping and a few drops of tears fell off her eyes. She consoled herself and went to bed.

A week later, Raghu was giving an account of his visits to various areas to Rana. He mentioned Randhir to Rana and waited for his response. Rana grimaced and said,

“Forget Randhir. He will never support us.”

“Why?”

“There is enmity between us. I warn you, never go to that area again. Never meet Randhir.”

“I will do as you say but I assure you that Randhir did not show any dislike for you.

“Wait for a few days and see. He will come out in his true colors. Don’t you know that he contested election against your father last year? Your father had exchanged blows with him”

“I remember now, Rana. Even I fought with his horde when he tried my patience.”

“Perhaps he didn’t recognize you. By the bye how was the response in the village side.”

“Great! The people appreciate your idea and they are longing to join the movement. Wherever we went, we met with favorable response. I have invited them for a secret meeting. They will assemble in the old temple outside the town on 29th at 3 in the after noon.”

“Prepare an agenda and I would like to go through it.”

“Okay, I will meet you tomorrow with the agenda,” he said and took leave of him.

As he walked his way home, Poonam occupied his mind. ‘She is my ladylove. I must marry her. But my father and Randhir are enemies and their enmity stands in the way of our marriage. I must think deeply before getting into trouble,’ he thought. He reached home and took some rest before he went out in the evening. He posed the same question again to Rana on the previous day of the proposed meeting.

“Do you think Randhir will cause trouble tomorrow, Rana?”

“You will know what Randhir does when he speaks in the meeting.”

“How do you know what he speaks tomorrow at the meeting?”

“Wait and watch.”

The meeting was about to commence. About 500 delegates had assembled at the venue of the meeting ostensibly to discuss the law and order situation in those areas. Raghu surveyed through his eyes and found to his surprise, Randhir sitting in the last row. He went and spoke to him with great interest.

“I am glad you have come. How is Poonam?”

“Poonam is doing fine. She was pleased to meet you,” he said as he shook his hands.”

Rana observed Raghu from a distance and called him to the dais on some pretext.

In a few minutes, the meeting began and Rana spoke in a covert language

“Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In spite of the fact, the British left our country long ago our situation has not improved. We are still the poor and illiterate mass. No development has taken place in our areas. We have no adequate water or

electricity. Our children have to talk long distances to reach their school. The quality of education leaves much to be desired. We need to make quick progress. We can make progress only if we have freedom. Now plans are made from outside and they are rarely executed. Most of the plans are not workable and remain more often only on the paper. We have to discuss the feasibility of having a separate state.” He was looking around to make sure that government agents did not attend it.

“Randhir walked to the dais and Rana became unnerved. He wanted someone to prevent him from reaching the dais, but nobody did. Raghu prayed God that no untoward incident should happen between the two. Randhir spoke in a clear crisp voice.

“Brothers and Sisters, we have assembled here to discuss the feasibility of forming a separate state for our areas. Rana has proposed it and me...”

Randhir stopped there for a few seconds and announced loudly,

“I second him. It is a great proposal. I welcome it.”

Rana did not expect this unexpected change of heart. He stood up from his seat, greeted Randhir and hugged him. The meeting endorsed the view that they must fight for a separate state. Randhir heaved a sigh of relief.

When the meeting was over, he asked Randhir

“I didn’t expect that you would extend the hands of friendship. What is the reason for your change of heart?”

“Your emissary, Raghu, won my heart. You must attribute today’s success to him. Poonam has all respects for him. She has asked me to invite him for lunch one of these days.”

Raghu who was a bystander felt so glad that he touched the feet of both the leaders. He claimed up the dais and announced that the matter should be kept a great secret and should never draw the attention of the media. During the meeting the delegates were told that they should contact and submit their views, ideas and plans in person to Raghu.

Two months elapsed. Raghu met the police employees union and solicited their co-operation. His mission with the police was a great success. Some of them vouched that they would not lift their arms against the campaigners. Some soldiers in the army assured that it was now a revolutionary Force and he could use it to his advantage. Then he

contacted army men of his areas and some of them assured maximum assistance for the liberation of their areas. Now he was more confident of his success. He went to Habib's place to meet Aziz.

"We are now ready for a take off stage. Aziz, what we need now is a huge sum of money and non-stop arms supply."

"How can you expect us to carry cash from Pakistan?"

"But you said the other day that you would supply money."

"Yes I said it. It does not mean that I have a cache of money here in India. You have to set up an establishment for it."

"What establishment do you mean?"

"An establishment for printing notes. Here is our printing expert. Order him now. In two days he will supply you fake American dollars or Indian rupees."

"But he prints fake notes and if we are caught, our mission will be doomed to be failure. I would not want to take such risks."

"You have no alternative. You have to appoint money-doubling agents to con people. Set up an organization for doubling money. You know what I mean. Your appointed agents will induce the greedy and gullible people to part with their genuine money if you supply them double that amount in fake currency. That organization must constantly work for generating money for your use."

"Is there no other way?" he meekly asked in exasperation.

"You cannot generate enough money from this source alone. You have to use another source."

"What is it?"

"You have to generate money by distributing drugs. He asked the man at the door to bring 'alternate currency.'

He brought a bag filled with some powder. You have to run another establishment for distributing these drugs opium and herein. We are importing these from Afghanistan and elsewhere."

"You will send me to jail, I am sure."

“You are on a dangerous assignment. You may even lose your life. This is just an auxiliary business in the larger process. Have you brought your car?”

“Yes,”

“Carry ten kilo a week. This must generate sufficient funds.”

“What shall I do if this is not enough?”

“We have Don’s henchmen who will help you in robbing Banks. They do a quick neat job. You will be amazed to see them in action.”

“O God, I am trapped. Save me.”

“What did you say? Oh, God, save me. God will not save you. Your god will certainly not save you. You have to save yourself. Bye.”

“God will never excuse me, Aziz. I don’t want to be a part of this dirty game. I need to be relieved.”

“Do you see those two men at the door? I may relieve you of your job but they relieve you of this world. They are dangerous. You can never get out of this mess. Don’t look back now. Move forward. Do or die. Bye.”

Raghu went out of the hotel in a disturbed state. He wanted to stay away from Aziz and marry Poonam. “As a terrorist, marrying Poonam would be a mistake, as both police and army would hotly pursue me; and my life would always be in danger. I have only two options, to live a rich man or die getting to become rich. There is no other choice.” His heart was throbbing to get near to Poonam but he knew she would reject him if she came to know that he was waging war against his country. However he decided to keep her in the dark on his nocturnal and subversive activities. There was another matter that agitated him. ‘One day or the other, Randhir would come to know that I am the son of Dalgit and that would be the last day that he would extend his hands of friendship with me. I will never be able to get married to Poonam.’ He thought and his spirits dampened.

Raghu knocked at Poonam’s doors and she came out. She was pleased to meet and greet him. He came in hesitantly and sat on the sofa looking at her in great admiration. He could not speak to her for a few moments. She broke silence and spoke,

“Baba has gone out. He will be here for lunch.”

“I came to see you, not Baba.”

She gave a faint smile, but did not seem to appreciate his initiative.

“Have I offended you by talking like this?” he asked her taking her hands in his.

“Not at all, I am really pleased. There is someone whose heart, throbs for me. In fact I was anticipating your arrival.” She said concealing her discomfiture.

“How did you know that I would come to meet you?”

“When the flowers bloom, the bees come buzzing. It must be anticipated.”

“You are very imaginative. I have been longing to meet you again from the day I met you. It is already two months and I could not find any pretext to come here. To day I dared to come.”

“You are lucky he is out of town. If he were here he would have asked you a hundred questions and scared you by now.”

“I know. I am not all that gallant but the circumstances make even the eeriest the bravest,”

There was knocking at the door and her father came in.

“Good morning Uncle.”

“O’ my dear young man, what are you doing here? When did you come?”

“I came two hours ago. I was passing by this village and I thought that I should see you and get your blessings.”

“It is very nice of you that you remember me. Last time when you came here I was very formal and could not even enquire about your family. Today we have all the time in this world to know each other. Where are you from, and who is your father? What is he doing?”

“I am the only son of Randhir of Rampur.”

“Hum! Randhir, He stood for election against me in the last election, right?”

“Yes, he is the one.”

“Do you know that he was campaigning against me and there was fistfight between us?”

“I did not know about that.”

“He is my sworn enemy. He has been trying to decimate my political career.”

“You have mistaken him, Uncle. He is a very good man. Whatever he did that day, he must have done under grave and sudden provocation.”

“A young man attacked my horde that day. Wasn't it you?”

“Yes Uncle, I am sorry and apologize for that.”

“But there is feud between two families for years. Your father has been trying to defame and denigrate us.”

“I beg your pardon, Uncle, if anyone in my family has hurt your feelings or your interests in any manner.”

Randhir gloated at him out of malice, stood up as if stung by a scorpion when there was a knocking at the door and his brother, Prem came in

“Hello my dear brother, welcome to my house. I am seeing you after a very long time. Meet this young man, Raghu.”

“Hello Uncle,” Raghu said without raising his head.

“You rascal, how dare you enter this house. I will thrash you now. Leave this house immediately before I raise my hands against you.”

“Brother, why are you so angry with him? He is my guest. He is our associate and a supporter.”

“He has another side of his life. He is an extortionist, and a gangster. He is the one who stalked Poonam and enticed her.”

“You rascal, I will kill you.” Randhir shouted at the top of his voice and raised his hand.

“Stop Randhir, I take care of him. Don't do anything in haste. You will repent at leisure. Come on out. We will have a talk outside and come back.” He then turned to Raghu and said,

“If we see you anywhere near this village, we will hang you to the nearest tree.” Both went out leaving Poonam and Raghu.

. Raghu looked at Poonam and her face had turned pale. She knew their love story had come to a sudden end. Raghu went to her, seized her hands and held it fast for a few minutes and she clung to him emotionally as her eyes burst into tears.

“Poonam, don’t think that it is all over. It is just a beginning of our love and many a storm may arise in our life and we must get ready to face it.”

“I don’t have enough courage to face my father and uncle.”

“Gather courage and get ready to face life boldly. I will come back to see you next Tuesday by ten in the morning at the temple. Go over there on the pretext of worshipping God. I will meet you there. That will be our meeting place hereafter.” He told her and walked away briskly without turning back.” There was storm in his mind. ‘The elders will never agree to this marriage. We have to marry against their wishes and that would mean further enmity between the two families,’ he thought. He vividly remembered that he had hacked Randhir’s crony in the presence of Randhir at the time of last election. ‘No apology can bring the two families together. That means we have to run away from home and marry in the presence of friends.’ He mused.

A week later, he was there at Sitapur again behind the temple hoping to meet Poonam and sighed when he saw her anxiously waiting for him. They hoped that no unsavory incident would happen there. They went to a corner, where there was none and waited for a few minutes for the devotees to get busy worshipping. Then, Raghu came close to her and tied a golden pendant round her neck and said,

“This is in token of our marriage. We are now married in the presence of God. You can boldly tell everyone that you are married to me.”

“Do you know the consequence of such an announcement?”

“I can imagine, but I don’t give you up under any circumstance. This is my promise to you.”

“We shall keep this a secret and announce at the opportune time. Okay? When shall we meet again?”

“Next week, we will meet here at ten and proceed to Sub Registrar’s office to register our marriage under special marriage Act.”

“My father will not hesitate to murder you if you play with the honor of his family. Please don’t do any such thing.”

They stayed behind an idol and watched people around for a few minutes, and when they came out of their hiding, they suddenly heard her

father's voice. They hid behind an idol and shuddered when they saw her father with some goons. As they turned round the corner, Raghu walked away from the posterior door and escaped.

Poonam was longing to see Raghu, and days appeared too long for her. Six days passed by. She was very uncomfortable and worried on the seventh evening as he was apprehensive of the portending danger in eloping with Raghu in the absence of her father. 'Papa is suspicious of Raghu, and he would not hesitate to murder Raghu if he saw him anywhere near me.' She thought and decided not to meet or talk to him again to avoid from the disaster. Next morning, her father stayed home.

"Papa, you were supposed to go to Delhi today." She asked him to ascertain his schedule.

"I am not going anywhere, Poonam. I have cancelled all engagements for the day," he said gloating at her.

She was sure that he had cancelled his tour to hunt down Raghu if he showed up anywhere in or around the village. She became worried about the safety of Raghu. She wanted to get out and reach him to forewarn him, but she did not know how. Randhir was sitting close to the main door and one of his men was sitting outside the gate. She prayed to God to save Raghu as Randhir prayed God to save the honor of the family.

The wall clock was chiming ten when Randhir got up from the sofa and went out. She came out and saw her father going with his man in the direction of the temple. She panted when she imaged the encounter between Randhir and Raghu. An hour passed by and she hoped that everything was normal in the village: and surmised that either Raghu did not come to the village or he must have gone back without being seen by her father. Now she was heaving a sigh of relief when suddenly she saw an ascetic in saffron robe with a begging bowl coming towards her. She ran in and was about to close the door from behind when the sanyasi said in a low but distinct voice,

"It is I, Raghu. Stop" She looked behind, as the voice was familiar, waited there until he came close and looked into his face. He removed his fake beard and hair for a second to help her identify him. She appreciated his guts by giving a chuckle and whispered in a low tone,

"You really scare me. There is no time to talk. Papa and his men are searching for you. If they find you anywhere near, you will be hounded out

and slaughtered. Run, Raghu, run for your life. I don't want to see you dead."

"I am not afraid of anyone. I can face him."

"Do you really want to marry me?"

"Yes,"

"Then go away."

"I came to tell you about our next plan. I will come to Lakhanpur next Monday at ten. You must wait for me at the Bus stand. We will register our marriage in the Registrar's office. From Lakhanpur we will be heading to Delhi and from there, to South."

"I don't want to run away with you. If I elope with you, the family will suffer ignominy and for generations, we will be socially ostracized. I must try to convince my father."

"Your father will never agree to this marriage. If we want to marry, we have no option left other than eloping to a distant land. Once we declare that we are married, we may convince the elders and they will have no choice but to compromise with the situation. See you next Monday at ten in Lakhanpur Bus Stand."

"Raghu, we will go to Sub-Registrar's office and marry under the law and come back the same evening. Papa should not know immediately. We will keep our marriage a secret for sometime. Look, my father is coming with his men. Run for life" she said as she closed the door and peeped out of the window

Raghu turned back and saw Randhir accompanied by two men. He stretched his hand with bowl towards them. Randhir did not recognize him. He just threw a rupee coin into his bowl and walked into the house. The ascetic disappeared suddenly from the spot.

One of his men sensed something fishy as he had seen him with Poonam from a distance. He claimed that he was a fake sanyasi and had seen him with Poonam when they had turned round the corner of the street. Suddenly Randhir surmised that the sanyasi was none other than Raghu and asked his men to go after him. Raghu jumped into his car and sped away. The whole day Poonam was laughing in her room remembering how he outwitted her father. Randhir was burning with rage that he could not catch Raghu in spite of his earnest effort. He vowed that he would catch him when he shows up next time.

Another week was coming to close and Poonam was still puzzled unable to take decision on the plan hatched by Raghu. She knew that Randhir would somehow outsmart him and spoil their plans. Randhir did not sleep in his bedroom fearing that Raghu might play some mischief and preferred to sleep on the couch outside. He had called one of his men to sleep at the front door of the house. It was a strategy that would work under any circumstance. Poonam resigned to her fate and gave up the idea of reaching Lakhanpur by next morning.

Suddenly there was knocking at the door and Randhir himself opened the door. It was dark outside. He saw a bearded man with long hair standing at least twenty feet away.

“Who are you?” asked Randhir, piercing his eyes into darkness.

“I am Rana’s chauffer. Rana sent me here to inform you that they have planned an emergency meeting tomorrow at eight in the morning. He has sent a ride for you. We should leave this place at seven.”

Randhir gave a quick look at the car. It looked like a new car.

The driver, who had covered his face with his shawl, as there was cold out side, went back to his car. Randhir felt elated because Rana thought that he was his trusted lieutenant and gladly went to bed. He got up at five, had a clean bath and left home to see Rana. The brand new car was running at high speed and Randhir enjoyed the travel, as it was an air-conditioned sedan. “Rana is a rich and influential man. I am sure he will get me ticket for the next election,” he thought as he traveled.

“Rana drives this car, Opal Astra. He sends his car to bring only his best friends,” the driver explained from behind his veiled shawl. Rana was elated.

The car reached Rana’s house at eight. He stopped the car in front of the house, and the driver told Randhir as Randhir got off,

“Sir, I have not had my breakfast. I shall go home urgently.”

Randhir gave him a hundred-rupee bill and asked him to have his breakfast. The driver saluted him and drove away.

Randhir knocked at the door and Rana’s assistant came out and opened the door. When Randhir sat on a chair, the assistant asked courteously without hurting Randhir,

“Sir, do you have an appointment with Rana?”

“”Yes, he sent a ride for me yesterday night to meet him at eight in the morning.”

“There is some mistake sir. So far as my knowledge goes, he did not send any ride for you. There must be some mistake.”

“Who was that fool who came to pick me up?”

“I don’t know sir. I wouldn’t know it.”

Randhir was agitated now. He got up from his seat and walked out.

The driver who brought Randhir threw aside his Kashmir shawl and sat upright as soon as Randhir got out and started driving at full speed towards Lakhanpur. The driver was none other than Raghu. He reached Lakhanpur Bus Stand exactly at ten. As soon as Randhir left his house in the morning, Poonam managed to reach Lakhanpur and waited for Raghu. Raghu stopped his car in front of her, and she jumped into the car and they were gone.

It was ten O’ clock in the night. The rain was pounding the city, and the monsoon winds had uprooted the electric poles and plunged the entire city in darkness. Randhir was standing in the porch in darkness awaiting the arrival of his daughter Poonam, as he was worried about her safety. She had left home in his absence early in the morning and had not returned till late at night. He was peevish at her insolence in leaving the house in his absence but as the darkness came upon and the rain started pounding, he became more concerned about her safety and peevishness gave way to worry. At thirty minutes past ten, Poonam arrived at the gate-soaking wet. Both of them silently entered the house.

“Oh, Poonam, I was so upset that you had not reached home till so late in the night. Thank god you have safely reached home.”

Sujaya, Randhir’s second wife, who was home that night, came out shouting at her.

“You are incorrigible. Where had you been since morning? What were you doing? Your father has been searching for you the whole day.”

“I had gone to meet Raghu?” She said boldly in an astonishingly firm tone that surprised both Randhir and Sujaya.

“We had forbidden you from meeting him. How dare you disobey us? You must honor our words or quit this house.” Sujaya shouted.

“Just wait for three days. I will quit this house.” Poonam said controlling her anger.

“No, you have to quit our house right now,” Sujaya insisted.

“Where can she go in this darkness, my dear? Have pity on her. I will talk to her tomorrow morning.” Randhir said, and asked Poonam,

“What is the matter Poonam? How dare you talk of quitting this house in three days?”

“Papa, Raghu and I have decided to marry on Sunday morning at Krishna temple. We had gone there this evening to fix the program and invite a few guests. That was why I was late to day.”

“You can’t marry without our permission. It is against our custom to marry without parents’ consent and in their absence. We have to do kanyadan, and we don’t do that. We have not consented to this marriage. Remember, we will not bless you.” Sujaya shouted

“Sujaya auntie, the amended law does not require parents’ consent or blessings. It only requires the solemnization of the marriage by saptapadi. I need your blessings but I am not desperate for it. We knew that you would not agree to this marriage and you would not let papa to agree to this marriage. For your information, we are already married under the special marriage Act in the presence of the Sub-Registrar. We are marrying under the Hindu tradition on Sunday as a formality, and to satisfy our friends and relatives. Papa, please grace the occasion and bless us.”

“You should not have done this, Poonam. We deserve better treatment than this. You have put us to shame and we are not fit to show our face to anyone in the society. You could have waited for the consent of your parents.”

“Papa, she is not my mother. If she were my mother, she wouldn’t ask me to quit this house. There is lot of difference between a mother and a stepmother. Why didn’t you kill me when my mother died after giving birth to me? You not only did not kill me but you also chose to marry this shameless woman unmindful of what would befall on me. Now I am paying price for your folly. I leave this house immediately, Papa. You and

mama will live more happily without me, I know.” She turned back to leave.

“No, Poonam, please don’t leave me. You have already caused enough damage to our reputation. I beg you to stay here this night. The weather is inclement and my heart is heavy. Don’t leave me and go.” He wailed.

“My dear, will you be quiet? Why are you begging her to stay? If she wants to quit let her quit. She has already done irreparable damage to our reputation and defamed us. The neighbors already know about her secret love affair and they are mocking at us.” Sujaya said at the top of her voice.

She turned to Poonam, and said, ‘Go away. We don’t need you. We presume you are dead. We legally disown you.’”

Poonam pulled the door open and stormed out of the house as Randhir sank into the chair and wept. Randhir’s family was very traditional until he himself flouted the norms of the society by marrying a woman from out side his caste after the death of his first wife. The inter-caste marriage was unheard of in those days and it offended both communities. His community had socially ostracized him and placed him in a great predicament.

At the dead of night, Raghu was waiting a few yards from Poonam’s house to pick her up if they threw her out of the house. Just then the pounding rain had stopped but it was drizzling still. The occasional lightning in the sky and the rumbling sound had made the night dreadful. She ran back to Raghu and hopped into his car.

“What went wrong?” He enquired.

“My mother ordered me to quit her house and my Papa stood there, looking on mutely. I ran out of that house in disgust.”

“Why did they ask you to leave the house?”

“You are asking me as if you can’t guess. They had inkling that that I was hiding something but they didn’t know what was amiss. To day I went late; and I lost my cool when they pushed me against the wall asking a volley of questions. I told them that we are already married under the Special Marriage Act. My father would have excused me but my mother turned against me and ordered me quit as my father looked on helplessly. Now the doors of that house are closed for me forever.”

“Don’t say so. They have acted under sudden provocation. When they calm down they will let you into the house.” We will make another attempt after we return from our honeymoon.

“You have mistaken, Raghu. Mummy is my stepmother. She has always been confronting me and waiting for a chance to throw me out of the house, and now she got an opportunity, which she did not let go. They will disown me, Raghu. I have nobody in this world now except you. Promise me Raghu that you will not forsake me under any circumstance.” She held his hands tightly and started weeping.

“Stop crying for heaven’s sake Poonam. I am with you and you are my wife. We will go to our house.”

They reached Raghu’s house at one in the morning. Raghu chimed the doorbell. The lights were turned on and the house became well lit.

“Raghu, who are you talking to at this hour of the night?” His mother asked as she opened the door. She was surprised to see a girl with him.

“Who is she? What is going on here? Why is she here at this hour? How long has she been coming to your bedroom overnight without our knowledge? Hey you, what do you think of this house? We are highly respected in this locality. You should be ashamed to enter our house stealthily. Will you leave immediately or shall I call the police.”

“Mom, what are you talking? She is Poonam, Randhir’s daughter.”

“Oh, Poonam, We have told you in no uncertain terms that this marriage will never take place. As long as we live, we will not let you marry this woman. Will you send her away or shall I call the police?” She was adamant and Raghu lost his cool.

“Mom you can’t send her away because she belongs to this family now.”

“What do you mean? How can she claim to belong to this house?”

“I have married her, Mom.”

“Married her? When and Where?”

“Three days ago, we were married before the Sub-Registrar.”

“Oh’ God, you have spoiled the honor of this house. Our son has married before the Sub Registrar without informing the parents and without their blessings. The whole neighborhood must be laughing

pointing fingers at us. We did not expect this from you my dear son.” She whined loudly and that awakened his father Dalgit who came out in half sleep like a sleep walker and demanded to know what was going on at mid-night.”

“Your son has secretly married that woman in court without our consent and knowledge. He has called her here without our permission and argues with me that she has right to live in this house.” She complained.

“I always had a feeling that he is outsmarting us. I know for sure what he is up to. Raghu, listen carefully. This house is mine. I have built this house toiling for fifteen years. You have right to stay here during your good behavior. Now that you have married her without our permission, I have no choice but to throw you out of this house. Will you please leave?”

“Papa, listen, we are legally married but we also want to marry according to our customs and traditions. We have arranged for our marriage in Krishna temple on Sunday morning. We invite you to bless us. That will end your embarrassment as well as ours.”

“Do you think that marriage is a game? Marriage is sacred bondage between two families, and so, the consent of all members of both the families is necessary. You can't force a stranger into our family. We don't accept this female as our daughter-in-law. Please leave this house instantly,” He went into his room and closed the door behind. The mother followed him to the room. Raghu and Poonam could hear them talking but they could not follow the conversation distinctly. He went to his room and collected his personal belongings as Poonam waited for him to return at the door, and when he came down, they closed the door behind them and drove away to a hotel. He had married Poonam against the consent of his parents and that had left a void in his life, which he was finding hard to reconcile. They were married in the presence of some friends in Krishna temple three days later.

Dalgit had a big business and he became a businessman by virtue of his ability and skill. He built his business empire from the scratch. His was a traditional family where every family law was respected and every member obeyed those laws implicitly. No one in his or her family even thought of marrying outside caste. No one had married secretly, without the consent of the parents. Raghu had thus hurt their sentiments by flouting family customs and traditions.

Raghu and Poonam got married in the presence of some friends in Krishna temple. Raghu exchanged the wedding rings and garlands in the presence of his guests who showered their blessings on the newly wedded couple. He had already planned to take his beloved wife on a honeymoon to the south. Next morning they had to travel to Madras by Grand Trunk Express.

Raghu opened his eyes and looked into his watch. It was showing nine. He hurriedly got up, as they had slept a little longer and readied to leave in an hour. Poonam was still in deep sleep. He bent over her and softly pressed his lips on her cheek several times before his lips awakened her and in one swift move, she pulled him over to her.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“I am doing what I am supposed to do. I am making love.”

“It is a violent way of doing love. It does not suit a soft person like you.”

“I am very soft but I can be hard to. You know I am a karate black belt.”

“Okay, you can carefully preserve your black belt among other exhibits. We have to leave this place in an hour. Get up from the bed and get ready.”

He left the room in a hurry. Poonam got up from the bed turning to right side as she believed that if she gets up from the left side, everything goes wrong that day. She prayed God for a few minutes silently and then slowly moved away to bathroom to take showers. When she was in the bath room, she remembered Raghu and composed a song,

“Ever since I have met you, my heart throbs for you.”

In the next moment, she was thinking of something unpleasant that could happen to her and that sent in her a chill wave that shook her body. She dressed up in half an hour and stood before Raghu. Raghu gave her a gentle kiss and they started out. They called out a taxi that came to a creaking halt and hopped into it. An hour later they were traveling in the train to Madras. That was a bright afternoon and it was a twenty-six hour journey. They reached Madras next morning and stayed in a hotel the

whole day taking rest and enjoyed eating *vada-sambar and masala dose*. Next morning they got off their bed early and strolled along the beach talking of their plight when get back to Delhi. It was a sunshiny morning and there were very few people on the beach most of whom were fishermen and their families.

“Raghu, I appealed you to post-pone our marriage by another six months but didn’t listen. Now we are in deep trouble. We have no house to live. Where shall we do now?”

“Don’t worry Poonam. Everything will be all right. Gather courage my young lady and get ready to face some problems for a short period.”

“Everything will be alright, you say, but it worries me a lot. We are passing through the whole gamut of uncertainty and anxiety. I am not enjoying our honeymoon at all. I feel like going back immediately.”

“See there, the waves are rising high. What a beautiful sight! Where is my camera? Give it me. I am a very good photographer. I will convince that I am the best photographer. I shall take a photograph of the rising waves.” He took a photograph and she continued the conversation.

“Look, you should search for a good job as soon as we reach Delhi in some international companies. Promise me that you will not laze away your time in roaming around aimlessly convincing people for a separate state. I don’t like politics. You should not take it as your career. Politics is the last resort of a scoundrel. You are such a nice person and you should be a software specialist”

“I wish I were a computer specialist. Circumstances changed our ambitions and goals.”

“Promise me when we get back you will not join Rana’s movement.”

“I wish I would not join Rana but you know we need money- a lot of money to keep you happy. Next year our child will arrive from your womb and we have to bring him up. I have family responsibility, you know.”

“Promise at least you will leave politics once you get a good job.”

“I promise you that I will leave my political career when I get good job as a software engineer, okay.”

Suddenly the sunshine disappeared and gave way to dark clouds.

“Look at the nature’s beauty, a minute ago, there was grand sunshine and now the overhanging clouds. Our life is also like this. Fifteen days ago, I was a rich man. I had a big mansion, Servants around at my beck and call. A beautiful car to drive around and frequent parties and a lot of fun and now, no home, no servants...”

He boded his head wistfully.

“Don’t worry Raghu. We have to keep up our morale high and live on hope. If we break down now, we will go down in the eye of the people.” She raised her head and looked at sea. The waves suddenly rose and the people near the water started running away from the sea. Poonam looked at the people running in panic, and in the fraction of a second, the entire area was covered with water and many of those who were running, washed away into the sea. Raghu saw the disaster, held her hands firmly and ran behind the bushes. The waves rose again and started moving towards shore with greater speed. Both of them held on to thick bushes firmly for a while and closed their eyes. The waves came upon them and subsided at their feet.

“We have a few minutes to escape. Run behind that building over there.” He said and ran, followed by Poonam. They took refuge behind a building. They were completely wet and started shivering. They stood there for an hour and the waves rose so high that some of the houses built of mud were washed away but the building behind which they had taken shelter withstood the thrust exercised by the lashing waves.

“Come on, we shall go back to hotel.” She wailed.

“Thank God, we have survived. There are a number of people in the beach lying dead. We shall not run away from here like cowards. Be brave. We shall try to help people in distress. We will go to the beach and see if anyone needs our help.”

“Don’t go towards the Sea. You will be washed away.” She shouted but Raghu moved towards the sea and she followed him in great distress and dread. They slowly went to the beachside.

Some people who ran away to escape death, started coming back to pick up their belongings left behind by them. They saw a group of four foreign visitors, two men and two women standing in their swimsuits, bewildered as the clothes and handbags left behind them were washed away into the sea. Their passports and other documents, their money and other belongings had gone deep into the sea. They stood there, sky above

and mud below, praying anxiously for help. Raghu and Poonam proceeded a little farther where a girl of 16 was standing alone weeping. A man of twenty-five came over to her. He spoke to her for two minutes and started dragging her forcefully. They went to the rescue of the girl and enquired who she was and what happened.

“My name is Lakshmi. I came with my mother and younger brother. They were washed away but I have survived. I don’t know what to do. This man is dragging me somewhere. I don’t want to go with him. I don’t know him.”

“Don’t worry. We can help you.” Raghu turned to the man, who was dragging her and asked him,

“Why are you dragging her?”

“I am taking her home.”

“She says that she does not know you.”

“Nevertheless, I take her home. She has no one to look after her”

“Lakshmi, do you want to go with this man?”

“I am not going with that man. I don’t know who he is. I prefer to go with you.”

“Hey you, if you touch her again we will go to the police. Go with us to the police station, establish your identity and seek police permission to take her.”

He muttered something in his language that they could not understand and went away in the opposite direction.

Poonam held her by hand and asked if she knew where her father was?

“My father died long ago leaving me, my brother and my mother. My brother and mother were washed away. Now I have no one in this world and I am orphaned. I have no place to go.”

“We live in Delhi. Do you like to stay with us?”

“Yes, I will stay with you but don’t take me to the police station. Okay?”

“Why are you afraid of going to the police station?”

“I don’t trust them. I don’t need their help. They do more harm than good.”

They took Lakshmi with them to the hotel. They stayed in the hotel for a day and checked out, cutting short their journey. They reached Delhi two days later. During the journey they had enough time to interact with her.

“How far have you studied?”

“I have passed matriculation.”

“Were you working anywhere?”

“No, I am good at music. I want to become a great singer.”

“Good, when you recover from the shock we will get you tuition in music. What kind of music are you interested in?”

“I like gazals, classical and film hits.”

“We can help you, relax.” She looked out of the window wistfully.

“Now what shall we do? We are three now” Raghu asked Poonam.

“I don’t know. We will go to your house first and ask them to forgive us,” suggested Poonam.

“My father will never forgive me. He is very tough sort. He has definitely disowned me now. We will stay in a hotel and search a house for rent.” Raghu replied.

“Anyway we will give a try. He may excuse us. He may be even longing to meet us.” She gave him a new hope.

They hired a cab and went to meet his father in his house. They asked the cab driver to wait for half an hour and knocked at his father’s doors. His mother came out and called him in. Poonam was a little relieved.

“Who is it?” His father shouted from his room.

“Raghu has come home,” replied his mother hesitatingly

He came out and fixed eyes on Poonam for a minute and then turned to Raghu, and said,

“So, you are married.”

“Yes father, we are married. We got married last Sunday.”

“Who blessed you both?”

“Our friends did.”

“Oh, now you have to seek their help. Why have you come to us?”

“Father, forgive us. We have no place to go. Can we stay in this house until we make alternative arrangement, Father?”

“I am sorry, Raghu. Did you care for my feelings when I appealed to you not to marry her?”

“Sorry Father, I was wrong. Will you please excuse me?”

“No I won’t. You have violated the customs and traditions. The whole community has disapproved your marriage. I can’t keep you in my house until the elders of the community will accept you. Please seek shelter elsewhere. Okay,” he went back to his room. His mother’s eyes became wet. She went behind her husband to convince him, but he did not change his mind. Raghu went out with Poonam, Lakshmi following them sheepishly. They went to Poonam’s house and chimed the doorbell. Poonam’s father opened the door and called her in.

“Where had you been my dear? I was worried. I have even reported the matter to the police.”

“Papa, you know that we could not remain separated and so appealed to you to attend our marriage and bless us. I know that mama did not let you come. What could I do? I had to marry without your consent and in your absence.” She continued and said,

“Papa, we have come here to stay with you for a few days?”

Her stepmother, Sujaya, came out yelling at her.

“You left the house without our permission and married someone against our wish. Shame on you! You have exposed our family to infamy. Now you want to disgrace us by staying with us? I will not let it happen. Will you go out or shall I use force to throw you out?”

“No need to use force. We don’t want to stay here any more. Come on Raghu we shall go now.” Poonam walked back to the taxi followed by Raghu and Lakshmi.

It was a winter morning and the temperature was less than 60 F outside. They started searching for a house and by evening they had settled down for a flat in Kalkaji- a three bedroom flat, and started their life anew.

When they had settled down, their mind became cool and they sat to talk in a relaxed mood. They called Lakshmi and asked her to sit down.

“Lakshmi, we have entrusted you the job of house-keeping. You have to prepare food, clean the vessels, sweep and swab the floors and wash the clothes. You also buy essential goods to the house. Is it okay?”

“It is okay. Thank you for allotting me some work. I shall be glad to do it.”

“Start right now. Go to the market and bring some milk, tea powder and wheat flour. Keep this 1000 for expenses.” She gave her a bundle of notes, which she took and went in to keep it in her wallet.

When she was gone Raghu said,

“This girl seems to be good-natured. She may be of great help to us. We are very lucky to have her.”

“Yes, she appears to be good. We will wait and see.”

Raghu went out of the house for a few minutes, gave his new address to Aziz and Rana from the nearby public booth and returned home. Two hours later, a messenger knocked at the door and uttered a code. Immediately Raghu decoded, satisfied himself that the caller was Aziz’s man and went out with him.

“Aziz has asked me to arrange for furniture and drapery to your house. He says you shall have a neatly furnished home.”

“It is very kind of Aziz. I am highly pleased.”

The messenger left the place and Raghu returned to dress up.

“Who was it?”

“Poonam, Rana has sent words to meet him in his house. That is all. I must go now.”

“You must eat lunch and go.”

“I am not hungry. I will come back by sunset.”

Poonam was worried. She held his hands tightly and said,

“Raghu don’t go. I am afraid that this may be plotting to kill you.”

“Who will plot to kill me? Come on, dear.”

“You don’t know what is going on behind your back. My father is not as soft as he appears. He could be ruthless too. He may have sent one of his men. “

“Don’t suspect your father. After all, Will any father like to see her daughter a widow?”

She became silent but still she was tense. Raghu dressed up, prayed God for a minute and left.

“Don’t worry Poonam, I will be back,” he said as he closed the door behind him. Poonam sat in a chair awaiting his return.

When Raghu went to Habib’s place, Rana was already engaged in serious conversation with Aziz

“Good Day to everybody.”

“Good Day to you.” Aziz said

Rana called him to sit in a chair. When he had settled in his chair, Aziz said,

“The consignments have arrived at the border. Two trucks have been stationed in a jungle covered with woods. The trucks have brought 200 rifles. Have you hired a go down?”

“Yes. Everything is arranged. I have hired a dozen men and two trucks for the job.”

“Good, you must leave immediately with your men to the border. It actually borders Rajasthan. There is a creek and you have to cross the creek on foot to unload the consignments. It may take at least three days to load the rifles to the trucks on the Indian side of the border. It must be done between two and four in the morning.”

“I have trained my staff and they take care of it.”

“Bye, Bye. Contact my assistant, Qadar, for money and other logistics.” Raghu held a detailed discussion with Qadar until seven in the evening. It was completely dark and the streetlights were on when he walked into the alley. Two men suddenly pounced on him with hockey sticks and lifted the sticks to beat him up when suddenly the headlights of a car were turned on and the lights were focused on the assailants. The assailants ran away from the spot on their scooter. A burly gruff man walked down the car and accosted Raghu.

“Are you hurt?” He enquired.

“No. I would have been dead by now had you not turned on the headlight and scared away the attackers. You saved me before they could hit me on my head.”

“I just now parked my car and saw them running towards you with sticks. I turned on the lights to scare them away.”

“Thank you, Sir. You saved my life.”

“You are terribly shaken. You need a cup of tea. Come on, we shall go to the restaurant opposite.” He pointed to Habib’s place.

“Sorry I can’t make it. It is already half past seven. I must be going. May I know who saved me today?” he said mildly rejecting his suggestion.

“Anil Sharma is my name. I happened to be here by chance. You seem to be nervous after the incident. It is good to have a cup of hot coffee.”

“That is true. Come on, we will find some other eating place around.” Raghu said without showing reluctance on his face. He led Anil Sharma to a nearby restaurant. When they sat down, the Samaritan asked,

“What is your name??”

“I am Raghu. I live near Kalkaji.”

“I live in Malaviya nagar, not far from you. Here is my card.” He gave his business card and Raghu took it mechanically.

“What do you do for your living??”

“I am still searching for a job.” He started sipping Tea.

“It is very hard to get good jobs these days.” Sharma remarked.

“Yes, that is true.” Raghu agreed.

“At your age I was wandering in the streets of Delhi looking for job but nobody came forward to give me one.”

“What are you doing now, Sir??”

“I work for a multinational company. I am a PRO.”

“It is very nice to meet you. Thanks for your help.” He gulped coffee from the cup and got up from his seat to leave.

“You seem to be in a hurry.”

“Yes, I am. I must go now.”

“You refused to go with me to Habib’s place. Do you have any special reason for that?”

“Oh, no, I don’t prefer that place at all.”

“But you came out of that restaurant few minutes earlier.” He looked in askance.”

“I am late. I have an appointment at nine. I seek your permission to leave. We will talk some other time, okay?”

Anil Sharma let him go reluctantly and he darted off home in a taxi.” He decided not to disclose the incident to Poonam, as otherwise she would not let him go out during nights. He also decided to lie to her that he got a job in a detective Agency. He reached home by nine.

“Poonam I got a job in a detective agency. The job involves lot of touring.” He said as a prologue.

“That is really great. When will you report for duty?”

“I have already reported for duty and I must leave for a far off destination tonight.”

“Where are you going?”

“That is a secret. I am supposed to maintain secrecy. I can’t tell you and you should not ask me.”

“When will you return?”

“I am on a long tour and it may take at least four days. Don’t expect me before that. If there is further delay I shall inform you by phone.” He had his dinner, and he opened the door to leave,

“I am worried about your safety, Raghu.”

“Don’t worry I will be back safely.” He gently kissed her.

He sat in a taxi that was waiting for him and he was gone.

The driver was observing something in the mirror all the way. When the cab was about to enter the airport, Raghu inquisitively asked the driver why he was looking into the mirror all the time.

“A cab has been following us all along.”

He became frigid for a moment and then gathered courage and spoke,

“It is just a happenstance. It is a figment of your imagination.”

“Sir, I have been driving taxi for the last fifteen years. Don’t dismiss my apprehension so easily.”

By then the car pulled up and Raghu hurriedly walked away after paying Taxi fare. Raghu observed the people around stealthily from an angle and noticed that a sprucely dressed, tall, lean, man followed him to the plane. He must be a sleuth, Raghu surmised, becoming vigilant. When he alighted from the plane, Raghu managed to give a slip to the man behind and disappeared.

Next day by midnight Raghu reached the border and two trucks were waiting for him in a hiding opposite to a creek. His men worked for three hours after two in the morning and transferred the rifles to their trucks. He wore the driver’s uniform and drove the cab at full speed as the driver sat in the passenger seat in a casual dress. He went ahead of the trucks to make sure that the road was clear of the army and the police. For a few miles he did not encounter any problem. Raghu and his trucks had just passed the road when suddenly a truck with a trailer entered the road from a crossroad and blocked the way, cordoning off the area. Raghu diverted the trucks to a muddy road hid them in a dense forest, until the police combed the entire area and followed a false lead and when the police were out of the area he led the trucks to the main road and took a safe but round about road to reach the destination. Raghu read the newspaper next day and heaved a sigh of relief that he was not caught but he knew that he was not out of danger.

He arrived at Delhi next night and went straight to Habib’s place. Aziz was anxiously awaiting his return with newspaper in hand. Morning newspaper had reported that the terrorists had masterminded smuggling of weapons to the troubled areas and the government had foiled the attempt of the terrorists. No further details were available in the column. When he was seated, Aziz gave him the newspaper to read and asked without giving him a chance to read it,

“You have come back earlier than expected. Did the consignments reach safely?”

“Yes, the consignments have reached the warehouse. The police would have seized both the trucks and arrested the drivers if they had followed us to the forest.”

“It means trouble for us.”

“Certainly, there is something wrong somewhere. The Police had the information.”

“Next Tuesday the second consignment will arrive. I give you the time and place on phone, okay. Be prepared to leave on Tuesday.”

“I am always ready. You may call me anytime.” He got up from his seat and went into the restaurant to eat *biryani* before leaving for home. When he was home Poonam asked him,

“How was journey? Where are you returning from?”

“Don’t ask me anything. I had no sleep for three days; I must rest now.” He said and went straight to bed to avoid talking. In the next few minutes he was in deep sleep. Next Tuesday he carried out the mission successfully by leading two truckloads of rifles and machine guns to a terrorist camp. He became a regular supplier of weapons to the terrorist camps. Poonam felt something was fishy but could not decipher anything from the expression on his face. Next morning, he got up early and went away when Poonam was still in bed. As days passed by, Poonam observed that Raghu was always worried and anxious.

“Why are you always worried?” She asked

“No I am not.” He denied at once.

“Raghu, I remember the days when you used to come to my village. You were so frivolous and fun-loving. Now you always think that some misfortune may befall on you. You live under constant fear. Why?”

“Poonam I can’t answer all your questions. You ask certain brazenly impertinent questions and expect me to answer.” He said blaming her and she became quiet.

A few days’ later one morning two men came to the house and they had a long closed-door session with Raghu.

“Raghu, you have to take a very important assignment. You will place a bomb in a Plane.”

“Which plane, you mean?” Raghu felt his blood chilling.

“You will be given clear instruction three days in advance.”

“I am not in it. I don’t want to kill people unnecessarily. I want to surrender to the police. I will live a free life once I come out of the jail.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. You will put us behind the bars if you surrender to the police. We have no option but to kill you if you go to the police,” one of them said brandishing a pistol.

“Raghu, we are terrorists. We must expect death any moment. Remember, we can’t get out of this,” another said.

“I am sorry, I have done enough. I want to live happily hereafter. I don’t want to be involved in any such activities.”

“You have a mission in life, Raghu. You can’t run away from it. Get ready.”

“No. I can’t. I ‘m married and Poonam needs my company. I cannot die for any cause. Please leave me alone.”

“Well then, we communicate your wish to Baba. He may release you from your predicament.” They alluded to something that only Raghu could understand and Raghu stood there shivering as others left in a car. When they were gone, Poonam came to him and asked,

“Raghu, what is happening? Who are these people?”

“Poonam, I am in deep trouble. I can’t tell you what.”

“Tell me what it is. We will face what is to come, together.”

“Oh, Poonam, I will never discuss my problems with you. I have to face it alone. Don’t ask me about it again.” Raghu went away and Poonam wept to her heart content.

One day he came home late at night. He was looking worried but he tried to hide his worry by sounding calm.

“Poonam, we have received our visa to go to America. Be ready to fly at a short notice.”

“I am really delighted Raghu to settle down in America”

“Our final destination is United States. We are going to Canada for a few months and at the right moment we move to US.”

“How did you manage to get visa?”

“There is a Drama troupe going to Canada for giving performances there. We have included our name in the list of artists.”

“If the authorities come to know of it we will be deported back to India.”

“Of course, we face deportation but they will not be able to detect.”

“How do you know?”

“He told me that he has been transporting people to Canada and America for a long time. He makes 500000 dollars every year. Drama is only a facade to cover up this operation.”

“What shall we do there?”

“We will start a business there for our living. Someone has promised me to help.”

“Who is that great man?”

“I will tell you when the time comes, not now.”

He started snoring and Poonam became silent.

A week later, Raghu met Aziz.

“Raghu, day after tomorrow you have a new assignment. A convoy of defense personnel will be passing through a border road with men and equipment. You have to blow up the vehicles.”

“I have recruited 5000 volunteers and many of them have been well trained in the army. They have deserted the army and joined our campaign. We can easily carry out this operation.”

“Good luck.”

A week later, Raghu took twenty volunteers who had been well-trained in using machine guns to a narrow bridge and placed series of land mines on the road overnight. The volunteers were well trained by Aziz men at a terrorist camp. They were deployed on both sides of the road where they had laid the mines. He instructed them to wait for the blast or the army men to alight from their vehicle and shoot them mercilessly. The operation was carried out successfully and several soldiers were injured in the blast and at least twenty were killed. Raghu and his horde escaped from the spot unhurt. Raghu rang up from a telephone booth to inform Aziz that the job was done neatly and returned to his vehicle. Suddenly Prem encountered him.

“What are you doing here at this dead of night?”

“I had gone to meet a friend.”

“Where does he live?”

“In Daryagung”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t want to name him.”

“You must tell us whom you met in the dead of night or else, I will have to arrest you.”

Raghu terrified by the presence of Prem feared that his casual questioning might reveal vital information much against his will. He was also waiting for an opportunity to wreak vengeance against Prem. He suddenly fired at Prem and he fell to the ground motionless. Raghu thought that he killed him and darted away. He drove home through narrow lanes avoiding main roads, rushed into his house, closed the doors behind him and gasped for breath. Poonam came out and observed that he was panting in fear and asked him,

“What happened? Did you hit some one and run?” she asked innocently.

“Yes, some one ran into my car. The police may chase me. Don’t open the door. I tell them if they ask that I was home the whole day and you must vouch for it.”

“Someone must have seen you hitting the man!”

“I am sure no one was there.”

“Then the police can’t trace the culprit.”

He went to the bedroom, changed his dress and went to bed. No one disturbed them the rest of the night. Next morning he got up early and read the newspaper. The newspaper had reported that someone shot at Prem and escaped under the cover of darkness. No further details were available. He surmised that the police did not suspect him but feared if Prem survives, he will send him to gallows. Raghu panicked and called Aziz on phone and informed what happened the previous night.”

“Meet me at my office immediately.” Aziz instructed as he hung up the phone. Aziz immediately arranged for his ticket to Canada and asked him to leave India that night. Raghu phoned Poonam from a public booth.

“Poonam, our day of departure has come. We have to leave Delhi to night.”

“We need at least a week’s time to leave India. You should have talked to me before fixing the date.”

“Sorry Poonam, I have no time for that now. I am coming home late. Keep our baggage ready. Remember, less luggage, more comfort.”

“Where do we stay?”

“We will stay in a hotel until someone makes arrangement for our stay and then we live in rented premises. Bye, Bye”

“Wait a minute. Shall I go round the town today and meet my friends to bid goodbye?”

“Poonam, no, don’t tell anybody that you are leaving India. You are not meeting any of your friends and relatives.” He hung up. Poonam stood there bewildered. She could not understand what was going on. Lakshmi came and stood there not knowing what was worrying Poonam. Recovering from the shock, she said,

“Lakshmi, we are very sorry that we have to leave you and go away to America. You can stay here for a week and make your own arrangement for your stay. She gave 10,000 to her and said,

“Don’t tell anyone that we have left India. It is Raghu’s orders.”

It was nine in the night when they boarded a cab. When they reached airport an hour later they entered the baggage area, handed over the baggage and obtained boarding pass. He was a little relieved when they sat on the chairs opposite. Anil Sharma appeared from somewhere in the lobby. Raghu suddenly got up from his chair and walked into the toilet. Sharma came and sat opposite to Poonam.

“Where are you going to, young lady?”

“I am going to Canada on a short visit-for just eight days.”

“Is it personal or official?”

“Personal.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Poonam.”

“Who is traveling with you?”

“My husband,” she answered impatiently and got up from her seat to avoid him.

Anil Sharma went aside saying that he has to assist his relative book luggage.

Raghu suddenly appeared and asked Poonam to accompany him to the ‘check in’ counter.

“Can you show me the way to rest room before we check in?”

“Go straight and turn to the left. You will see the restrooms. Make haste”

She went there and did not return for five minutes. He sat there watching people around. Sharma was still there. Suddenly he conjectured that Sharma may be a sleuth as he appeared wherever he went and checked in leaving Poonam in the lobby. There were several police men around that further panicked him. He realized that his arrest was imminent and stealthily walked and checked in. Nobody noticed his movement and no one stopped him at the check in. He went and sat in the lounge anxiously looking for the possible arrival of the police. He was feeling sorry that he had left behind Poonam. He thought that she could be called to America when he had settled down there. Half an hour later Raghu was flying at a high altitude alone.

Poonam sat there weeping. Anil Sharma noticed her weeping and went to her and asked,

“Is anything wrong?”

“I don’t see my husband. The plane may have left.”

“What is his name?”

“Raghu”

“I know Raghu. He is a friend of mine. Where did he go leaving you?”

“I went to the rest room and when I returned from there he was gone.”

“Where was he going?”

“He had booked two tickets to Canada.”

“Do you know the travel details?”

“I didn’t ask him.”

He went round the lounge for five minutes and he had heard the announcement that the plane had left the airport fifteen minutes ago. He came back to inform her that Raghu was not in the lounge. Meanwhile the entire Hall became empty and the friends and relatives of the passengers were busy in the parking lot getting ready to leave. Poonam stood there

weeping alone. Anil Sharma was moved and he consoled her. The TV announcer was breaking the news.

“Prem, the DSP who was shot at by an unknown assailant, has regained consciousness. He is taking the name of someone, but the police do not want to reveal his name as it would affect the investigation process. The police have set up a dragnet to catch the culprit. All police stations have been alerted. They hope to catch him by tomorrow morning.”

“Come on, we shall go now. If he is in town he will certainly come home. If he is on plane he will contact you as soon as he reaches his destination. I assure you he is safe and everything will be fine.” Anil Sharma coaxed her to go home.

“Can you take me to my home?”

“Sure. Come with me.”

He took her home in his car. Lakshmi was standing at the door, weeping. Two police cars were standing in front of the house and the police were rummaging the house. As soon as she entered the house, a police officer came out of the house and started asking questions,

“You are Poonam.”

“Yes I am.”

“Ragu is your husband, right?”

“Yes”

“This is where Raghu lived, right?”

“Yes”

“Where is Raghu now?”

Poonam immediately realized something serious was afoot and became smarter.

“I don’t know.”

“Where are you coming from?”

“I am returning from my native town.”

“When did you see Raghu for the last time?”

“Three days ago. He went out of station and he has not returned.”

The cops, who were rummaging the house, came to inform the Chief Inspector that nothing incriminating was found. The Inspector turned to Poonam and said,

“You will have to come to station when ever we call you for questioning.”

She nodded and went into the house followed by Anil Sharma. The police went away.

“Why did police come?” Anil Sharma asked Poonam.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“Why did you lie to the police?”

“I guessed there was something wrong. I did not want to get involved by my foolish talk.”

“There is correlation between sudden disappearance of Raghu and arrival of Police. Raghu vanishing in the airport was not accidental. I surmise that Raghu saw the police entering the airport and before he was cordoned off he escaped. Either he checked in or went out of the airport. We will know in about two days.”

“You are right. Even I think so.” She said recollecting his behavior.

“What was Raghu doing?”

“He was working for a detective company. That is what he said.”

“He was lying. He must be doing some illegal business. That was why the police were here.”

“I was also suspicious about his movements.” Poonam said and slowly asked Anil Sharma,

“Why did you suspect him?”

“One day I parked my car in an alley and I suddenly saw four men lifting their hockey sticks to maul him in darkness. I turned on the headlights and they ran away. Did he talk to you about it?”

“No he did not tell me about any attack.”

“I understand that he will be back someday. He will not call you because he suspects that the police must be tapping your telephone line. You must patiently wait for his return,”

“How long shall we wait?”

“It could be months or years. I can’t say.”

“How much money do you have on hand?”

“She bent her head down and said,

“Not a penny. He had all his cash in his pocket. He was managing money.”

“So you are in deep trouble. Do you need money?”

She did not reply. He took 1000 from his pocket and gave her saying, ‘you may need this money.’”

“I can’t take this money because I can’t repay.”

“Don’t worry. You can repay at some later date, if possible. Now you need help. Take it.”

She hesitated for a while and took the money because she knew she cannot meet family expenses otherwise. He went away. She sat on the couch puzzled. Laksmi sat by her side and consoled her but to no avail. Three days passed but they did not hear from Raghu, and Poonam thought it was useless to wait for his call. Next morning, Laksmi noticed that Poonam was throwing up in the sink and she surmised that Poonam must have been suffering from fever. She did not know what to do and remembered Sharma. Sharma had left his number before leaving and had asked them to call in case of emergency. She called him to inform that Poonam threw up, and she may be suffering from fever. He told her that he would be there in half an hour.

Sharma returned there an hour later. Poonam had recovered a little.

“How are you feeling now?”

“I am feeling good.”

“Come on, get ready. I have taken appointment with my doctor. Do you have any family doctor?”

“No. We are new to this place. We don’t know anybody here.”

“Don’t worry. I will take you to our family doctor.”

“But I can’t pay for the doctor, you know.”

“You will pay back when you can. Don’t worry about money.”

“I assure you that I will pay back every penny you spend on us.”

“Never mind, Come on, we shall go now.”

Poonam and Laksmi accompanied Sharma in his car. The doctor examined and said,

“She is pregnant. She is carrying a babe of three months in her womb.” The doctor told Sharma and Poonam. She explained to Poonam the precaution to be taken and prescribed some medicine for the healthy

growth of child in the womb. An hour later, Sharma brought her back home.

“What is Lakshmi to you?”

He asked abruptly.

“She last her parents in rising waves that swept across the shore when we were on honeymoon in the east coast. She has no one to take care of. We brought her here to support her but we ourselves fell to bad days.”

“Lakshmi, what are your skills?”

“I have mastered Hindustani classical music.”

“Hindustani music, I love it. I know many people in the field. I will get you an opportunity to sing in the public. If you are good at it you can make money in it.”

She touched his feet and said,

“You are my godfather from now on.”

“Okay, I shall listen to your music first and assess how gifted you are.”

“You are welcome to test my skill.”

“Not now, I have to go somewhere urgently. I will come tomorrow evening. Be ready.” He went away hurriedly.

Poonam said, “God has come down to earth to help us. But how long can we accept his help?” The tears rolled down from her eyes.

Raghu arrived at Montreal and when he came out, one by name Preetam was holding placard with Raghu’s name. He introduced himself as Preetam and led him to a car. He drove him to his basement floor by one in the morning. Minimum essential cereals and pulses were stored in the kitchen. Preetam called him aside and said,

“Open an account in a bank tomorrow and they deposit 100000 dollars in your account in recognition of your service. You will lead an independent life.”

Life became normal in a span of two months and he was able to establish a small restaurant with the help of his acquaintance. He did not contact Poonam for he was afraid that it would provide clue to his whereabouts.

Next evening Sharma came home. Lakhmi received him with respect and the music session began. She sang many notes in different tunes and Sharma was mesmerized at her melodious music.

“Wow, you are really gifted in the art of music. There is a music competition in the town hall next Sunday. You must contest. I will register your name,” he said.

“Do you think I am fit to contest?”

“Yes, of course. You have a fair chance of winning.”

Next Sunday he took her to the competition and she stood first. They announced that there will be a district level competition the following Sunday. She excelled everyone and won admiration of the audience. A month later she was mesmerizing the audience at the state level. They conferred on her special title 'Sangeet Ratna'. Then she had become a recognized musician.

Two months lapsed. Lakshmi received an invitation to participate in a music concert. She sang so well that she started receiving many callings from many quarters to entertain people with her music. Sharma gave her lot of encouragement and support. Now money began to trickle in. Very soon she was earning enough money to support self and Poonam. She repaid Sharma's debt with thanks.

Nine months of confinement was over and the day of delivery approached. Poonam had knitted enough sweaters and socks for the 'to be born' baby and awaited smooth delivery. On the day of delivery, Sharma and Lakshmi waited outside the labor ward. Poonam developed complication and was operated upon. Operation was successful but the patient died leaving beautiful little one. Sharma and Lakshmi named the child as Sangeeta.

A year lapsed and one morning a Young man appeared at Lakshmi's door. He was neatly dressed, his head and beard, neatly shaven. He called out 'Poonam, Poonam.' Lakshmi opened the door with a small baby in her arms.

“Do you recognize me?” He asked.

“I couldn’t recognize you by your face but your voice appears to be familiar,” She said hesitatingly.

“I am Raghu. How could you forget your Godfather, Lakshmi?”

She looked into his face and recognized Raghu.

“Please come in. I am sorry I couldn’t recognize you. You have changed a lot.”

“I am longing to see Poonam. Will you call her out? I would like to give the biggest surprise of her life today. She has never seen me with head and beard shaven.”

“Poonam...!”

“Yes, my dear wife, Poonam.”

She placed the child on his lap and said,

“Don’t you think she is just like Poonam?”

“Who is this wonderful doll?”

“It is your beautiful little daughter.”

“My daughter, I didn’t know that she was pregnant when I left her.”

“Yes, we came to know of her pregnancy a few days after you left.”

“I want to see her urgently. I have come to take her to America. What will you do? I am sorry I can’t take you because of the visa problem. I will come back with Poonam next year and take you with us. Okay. Don’t feel bad. We will not forsake you. In the house of god, there may be delay but there wouldn’t be darkness. Call Poonam, I am longing to meet her. I don’t hear her voice. Is she not home?”

“No Raghu, you will never hear her. She is gone.”

“Where did she go?”

“She attained the feet of God.”

Raghu broke down and wept like a child. Two hours later he was looking little composed.

“Lakshmi, thanks for looking after my child. I lost my wife but you saved my daughter. I am deeply indebted to you.”

“I have just paid back your debt.”

She explained to him everything that happened after he disappeared. For two days he was holed up in the house thinking deeply and remembering his life with Poonam.

Third morning he called out Lakshmi and said,

“Get ready. We will go to American consulate and get visa for you and Sangeeta.”

“I can’t live with you as I am not related to you. Time has come when we shall part gracefully.” There were tears in her eyes. She continued,

“But I can’t leave, Sangeeta. She has been my companion ever since she was born. It pains me to depart from her. I just can’t leave her.”

“I have a solution. I will marry you this very minute. You can gracefully come with me as my wife and her mother.”

Lakshmi stood there perplexed. It was the most unexpected suggestion and she did not know how to take it.

“For the sake of Sangeeta, I have to consent to this ...” She stopped because Prem led by two cops entered the house, held Raghu firmly and handcuffed him.

Prem said in his gruff voice,

“Your game is over. Come on, we shall go to the police station.”

“Lakshmi started trembling at what was to come. She prayed God to save Raghu from the present predicament. At that point of time, Sharma entered the house. Lakshmi’s face beamed and she ran to him and said,

“Sharma you are Lord Krishna, the great savior. Whenever this family got into trouble, you protected them. Please save Raghu, I beg you.”

“Get up Lakshmi, This time I have come to arrest him. Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita that everyone must reap the fruits of his action. Raghu has done wrong and he needs to be punished. I will certainly help him when he comes back from penitentiary.” He turned to Prem and ordered,

“Take him away.”

“Who are you, Mr. Sharma!” She asked him wondering.

“I am the head of the corps of Detectives and Raghu is a terrorist,” he replied grimly.

Lakshmi stood there petrified.

THE END

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